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Boundaries shown on this map are those of the Republic of Belarus, and do not include the entire Belarusian ethnic territory parts of which extend into neighboring states.

EDITOR'S DESK

Belarus Finally Getting Washington's Attention

After nine years of neglect, official Washington has finally come to the conclusion that the political situation in Belarus cannot be ignored any longer. On May 3, the US House of Representatives, in a 409-2 vote, passed a strongly worded resolution (House Concurrent Resolution 304) in which the lawmakers condemned the Łukašenka regime for its human rights violations; called on the Belarusian government to engage in a dialogue with the opposition to restore a democratically elected government and constitutional rights of the Belarusian people; expressed support for Belarus' sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; and called on Russia to fully respect the sovereignty of Belarus (see FEATURES).

Subsequently, the resolution passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Senator Jesse Helms, its chairman, has promised to support its passage by the full Senate. Senator Helms and Congressman Benjamin Gilman, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, wrote a letter to President Clinton urging him to raise the question of Belarus with Russian President Putin during his June summit in Moscow. Before the trip, both the Russian and Belarusian foreign ministries blasted the resolution as an interference in the internal affairs of "two" sovereign states.

One might wonder what was it that led the US House of Representatives to pass a resolution dealing with a country that Washington had written off long ago as one being, in its view, within the Russian sphere of influence.

One could name four main reasons causing the Washington lawmakers to raise their concern: the unresolved constitutional crisis in the country, the military implications of the Russian effort to absorb Belarus, the rise of the democratic opposition, and the involvement of Western NGOs and the Belarusian diaspora.

The constitutional crisis was brought about by the country's president. The president was elected democratically in 1994; however, in 1996 he used a rigged referendum to extend his powers, dissolve the legal parliament, extend his term in office to 2001, and convert the country into a virtual police state. Human rights and civil liberties have been abrogated or simply ignored. Opposition leaders and their followers have become fair game. Western attempts to help mediate the conflict between the government and the opposition to resolve the constitutional crisis have produced no results so far. The president dismissed Western criticism as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

The Russia-Belarus union ploy for the annexation of Belarus has come lately to look more ominous when the military of the two countries signed an agreement to make Belarus an extension of Russiaís military power and thus threaten Poland — a NATO member — and the Baltic states. This action has caused concerns in Washington.

The opposition, fighting to restore a democratic form of government and prevent the union with Russia from becoming a reality, has become better

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organized, more cohesive and more sophisticated lately. A series of well planned and well executed rallies and marches brought a brutal response from the government, which in turn attracted the world's attention, especially that of Western human rights organizations.

With the help of Western NGOs and the diaspora, the frequency of opposition leaders showing up in Washington has increased. Their first intent was to "teach" Washington about Belarus. They were somewhat surprised that the people they met displayed copies of *Belarusian Review* and seemed well informed about the country. But the real breakthrough came about last February when Siamion Šarecki, speaker of the Łukašenka-disbanded 13th Supreme Soviet — which is still being recognized by Western powers as the only legal parliament in Belarus -- was invited by Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty to give a briefing on "Restoring Constitutional Democracy in Belarus" at their Washington headquarters. Prior to his Washington visit, the speaker was hosted by the Belarusian diaspora in Canada where he made several presentations on Belarus at Canadian universities. (By the way, this writer was much involved in having Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty extend the invitation to Mr. Šarecki — also helped arrange a number of meetings for him in Washington, including the one with Congressman Gejdenson, who later authored Resolution 304.)

During that visit Mr. Sharecki and two of his parliamentary colleagues, Ludmila Hraznova and Stanislau Šuškievič, the former speaker/head of state, met with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and with other officials at the Department of State and the National Security Council. On the legislative side, he met with Rep. Steny Hoyer and visited with House Speaker Dennis Hastert, Rep. Sam Gejdenson and Rep. Christopher Smith, Chairman of the Congressional Helsinki Commission. Mr. Smith encouraged Mr. Šarecki to come back and testify on Belarus at a Commission hearing. The hearing was held in March where both Šarecki and Šuškievič testified and the House passed Resolution 304 on May 3. A four-member opposition delegation visited Washington in the second half of May and met with administration officials and members of Congress (see FEATURES).

The adoption of the resolution and follow-up letters to President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright from Senators and Congressmen and the friendly reception of the opposition delegation offer some hope and encouragement that the case for the restoration of democracy in Belarus is gaining momentum among the lawmakers. Now it's the Administration's turn. There have been no reports as to whether the issue of Belarus was raised by President Clinton during his Moscow visit. One must assume it wasn't, knowing Mr. Clinton's deference to Russian sensitivities.

One of the Washington officials made an interesting remark in February. He said that year 2000 will be the year of Belarus in Washington. We pray he was right. We feel disappointed that the US media have found nothing newsworthy to report on the issue. We feel differently about it and, have sent our bouquet of thanks to the people who made this happen.

Acknowledgments

Support in Creating BR. We wish to express our thanks to our friends who helped prepare this issue: David Marples and Stanislau Šuškievič for contributing articles; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for permission to reprint copyrighted material; Charter '97, Coalition in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus, and International League for Human Rights for using their material; Orest Deychakiwsky, Alex Silwanowicz and Jan Zaprudnik for helping with source material; Alice A. Kipel for editing; George Stankevich for typesetting and distribution; and Vaclau Bahdanovich for reproducing the issue in Belarus.

Correction

"Brief biographies of guests in Prague" (Vol. 12, No. 1, page 19) contains an error in name spelling. The name "Paul Paškievič" should be spelled "Pauline Pashkevitch."

Joe Price
Editor

FEATURES

U.S. House Resolution Condemns Belarus Human Rights Record, Calls on Russia to Respect Belarus' Sovereignty

By Art Turevich

By a 409-2 vote, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution (H. Con. Res. 304) on May 3, in which it condemned the continued egregious violations of human rights in Belarus, the lack of progress toward the establishment of democracy and the rule of law in the country, called on the Belarusian government to engage in negotiations with the opposition and to restore the constitutional rights of the Belarusian people, and called on Russia to respect the sovereignty of Belarus.

The resolution, cosponsored by 130 congressmen of both parties, was authored and introduced by Congressman Sam Gejdenson, the ranking minority member of the House International Relations Committee. It was first approved by the Committee on April 13.

The resolution still needs to be approved by the US Senate. Senator Jesse Helms, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he would support the resolution. The Chairman of the International Relations Committee, Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-NY), Rep. Sam Gejdenson (D-CT) and the Chairman of the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ), spoke in support of the resolution on the House floor.

Following is the full text of the resolution (H. Con. Res. 304) as read by the House Clerk and reported in the Congressional Record:

Whereas the United States has a vital interest in the promotion of democracy abroad and supports democracy and economic development in the Republic of Belarus;

Whereas in the Fall of 1996, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka devised a controversial referendum to impose a new constitution on Belarus and abolish the Parliament, the 13th Supreme Soviet, replacing it with a rubber-stamp legislature;
Whereas President Lukashenka organized a referendum in violation of the 1994 Belarusian Constitution, which illegally extended his term of office to 2001;

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Whereas Lukashenka's legal term in office expired in July 1999;

Whereas Belarus has effectively become an authoritarian police state, where human rights are routinely violated;

Whereas Belarusian economic development is stagnant and living conditions are deplorable;

Whereas in May 1999, the Belarusian opposition challenged Lukashenka's unconstitutional lengthening of his term by staging alternative presidential elections, unleashing the government crackdown;

Whereas the leader of the opposition, Semyon Sharetsky, was forced to flee Belarus to the neighboring Baltic state of the Republic of Lithuania in fear for his life;

Whereas several leaders of the opposition, including Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Yuri Zakharenka have disappeared;
Whereas the Belarusian regime harasses and persecutes the independent media and works to actively suppress freedom of speech;
Whereas former Prime Minister Mikhail Chygir, who was a candidate in the opposition's alternative presidential elections in May 1999, was held in pretrial detention on trumped up charges from April through November 1999;

Whereas the Lukashenka regime provoked the clashes between riot police and demonstrators at the October 17, 1999, ũFreedom March', which resulted in injuries to demonstrators and scores of illegal arrests;

Whereas hundreds of peaceful demonstrators and over thirty journalists were arrested during a March 25, 2000, pro-democracy rally in Miensk, once again illustrating the Lukashenka regime's disregard for freedom of assembly, association, and information;

Whereas the Lukashenka regime has refused to engage in meaningful dialogue with the opposition and has used the tactics of delay and obfuscation in disregarding the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)-mediated dialogue process;

Whereas genuine dialogue with the opposition and legitimate, free and fair elections cannot take place in the present climate of repression and fear existing in Belarus;

Whereas on April 3, 1996, Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin and President Lukashenka signed an agreement to form a Union State of Russia and Belarus;

Whereas there have been credible press reports that the Government of the Russian Federation has been providing assistance to the Lukashenka regime since the signing of the agreement to form a Union State, such as official Russian Federation Government credits, uncollected customs duties, assistance for export sales of Belarusian arms and joint manufacturing of arms, and reduced prices for energy supplies;

Whereas there has been a credible estimate cited in press reports that Russian Federation economic subsidies to Belarus reached $1,500,000,000 to $2,000,000,000 in 1996 and 1997 alone, enabling the Lukashenka regime to maintain a large police force and state control of the economy;

Whereas the Union Treaty, signed on December 8, 1999, by Belarus and the Russian Federation, undermines Belarus sovereignty and the prospect of democracy;

Whereas the Consultative Council of Belarusian opposition parties appealed to the Government of the Russian Federation, the State Duma, and the Federation Council calling for a cessation of support for the Lukashenka regime;

Whereas the former Chairmen of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet, Stanislav Shushkevich and Semyon Sharetsky, have stated that economic support from the Russian Federation has been crucial to the survival of the Lukashenka regime;

Whereas a Union Treaty between the Russian Federation and Belarus was ratified by the Russian Parliament and the illegitimate parliament of Belarus; Whereas the Union Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Lukashenka regime violates Russian Federation Government respect for the sovereignty of Belarus per the memorandum on security guarantees signed by Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin at the December 1994 Summit of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Heads of State in Budapest, Hungary; and

Whereas the introduction of any nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus, a declared non-nuclear state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, would be a violation of Belarus's obligations under that Treaty: Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That the Congress —

(1) condemns continued egregious violations of human rights by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime in the Republic of Belarus;

(2) further condemns the Lukashenka regime's conviction and sentencing of Andrei Klimov, Vasiliy Leonov, and Vladimir Koudinov on politically motivated charges and urges their release;

(3) is gravely concerned about the disappearances of Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Yuri Zakharenka and calls on the Lukashenka regime to ensure a full and timely investigation of these cases;

(4) calls for immediate dialogue between the Lukashenka regime and the opposition and the restoration of a democratically elected government in Belarus;

(5) urges the Lukashenka regime to respect and ensure the human rights of all Belarusian citizens, including those members of the opposition who are currently being illegally detained in violation of their constitutional rights and further urges the regime to respect the rule of law and an independ ent judiciary;

(6) further urges Lukashenka to hold legitimate, free and fair parliamentary elections in accordance with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) standards;

(7) supports the appeal by the Consultative Council of Belarusian opposition parties to the Government of the Russian Federation, the State Duma, and the Federation Council calling for a cessation of support for the Lukashenka regime;

(8) calls on the international community to support the opposition in Belarus by continuing to meet with the legitimately elected parliament;

(9) supports Belarus's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, as well as its market democratic transformation and integration among the broader trans-Atlantic community of nations;

(10) calls on the President of the United States —

(A) to ensure assistance to and cooperation with Belarusian opposition figures;

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(B) to ensure that adequate resources are made available on an urgent basis to support those programs aimed at strengthening independent media, human rights, civil society, independent trade unions, and the democratic opposition in Belarus; and

(C) to support the free flow of information into Belarus;

(11) calls on the President of the United States to raise the issue of financial support provided by the Russian Federation to the Lukashenka regime at the highest levels of the Russian Federation Government;

(12) calls on the President of the United States to urge the Government of the Russian Federation, in accordance with its international commitments, to fully respect the sovereignty of Belarus, particularly in light of the illegitimate nature of the Lukashenka regime; and

(13) calls on the President of the United States to prepare and transmit to the Congress a report on —

(A) the human rights situation, democratic process, elections, independence of the media, and the Lukashenka regime's control of the economy in Belarus;

(B) the steps undertaken by the United States to persuade the Russian Federation Government to end support to the Lukashenka regime in Belarus; and

(C) the status of Russian Federation-Belarus military integration.

REP. GILMAN opened the discussion by stating that the resolution points out that "the regime of Belarusan President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is unconstitutional and illegitimate"; that it "uses the very worst of Soviet-style tactics to repress political opposition and democratic government and to deny the people of Belarus their fundamental human rights"; and that "the Lukashenka regime is, in short, nothing less than a dictatorship, pure and simple."

With regard to Russia's pursuit of a reunification with Belarus, he said that "such a reunification is inappropriate and I believe an affront under international law," that "the Belarusan parliament is an illegitimate one . . . and no such negotiations should be conducted with it or, much less, agreements ratified with it." Another point raised by the resolution, he said, was "the fact that Russia has been providing considerable financial support, billions of dollars worth of such support, to that dictatorship in Belarus," while "getting hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from our Nation," while seeking billions of dollars in debt forgiveness . . . when the Russian government has received billions of dollars in loans from international financial institutions." "It is nothing less than shocking that the Russian government is spending millions of dollars to support a brutal dictatorship in Belarus and to fight a war in Chechnya that has killed thousands of innocent civilians."

"Mr. Speaker, I believe that this resolution should be a wake-up call to our President that now is the time to take action, appropriate action, that Russia cease its support for Lukashenka and his dictatorship. This resolutio n calls on the President to raise the issue of Russian financial support for the Lukashenka regime and to report to the Congress on the steps undertaken to persuade it to end that kind of support. Once again, that simply has to come to an end, and our Nation should make it clear that we not going to support further IMF loans, debt forgiveness or other forms of assistance of importance to the Russian government until it ends this kind of support to Belarus."

"Mr. Speaker, it is time for the Russian government to cease its financial support for the regime in Minsk, to halt its moves to reunify its government and military with Lukashenka's regime and its Armed Forces, to respect the sovereignty of Belarus, and to join us in sincerely working for the cause of true democracy in that suffering country."

"Mr. Speaker, I fully support the passage of this resolution."

REP. GEJDENSON pointed out that "This resolution may not even be directed at Mr. Lukashenka, because it is clear he is not listening. He is not listening to his own citizens . . . He is not listening to the international community. His country today is among the most isolated of the former Soviet countries. While many are moving towards democratic institutions and a better standard of living for their citizens, Belarus sadly continues to see both its democratic institutions and its economy deteriorate. So hopefully, those in the government in Belarus who recognize that what Mr. Lukashenka is doing to their country is wrong, is damaging, will join with the opposition, join to bring about change to work out a new democratic agreement to develop a civil society there. "

We hope that Mr. Putin and the Russians will put pressure on Belarus to move forward to try to attain democratic institutions and a free economy. It is in Russia's interests to see that its neighbor be developed in a democratic way and have a stronger economy. Russian subsidies of the Lukashenka government and cheap energy will only continue to harm the Russian economy, whereas a strong, independent, democratic and free Belarus would actually help the Russian economy and society."

"Mr. Speaker, we have all seen the abuse by the government in Minsk, Mr. Lukashenka's attack on people who want to protest for freedom. He is robbing the political system of the proper election process, and we now hear that he may be involved in illegal arms sales to the government of Saddam Hussein."

"Mr. Speaker, every Member of this House who treasures democracy, every one of our allies in the world today recognizes that sadly it is Belarus alone that has the worst of the post-Soviet era, a crumbling economy, a lack of democracy; and the fact that the dialogue continues to deteriorate is a very bad sign there. It will not go unnoticed in this Chamber. It is one place where our European allies stand with us in opposition to the Lukashenka government. We will not end this struggle until the good people of Belarus have their chance at freedom and a better life."

REP. SMITH noted that he chaired a Helsinki Commission hearing on Belarus in March, which addressed many of the issues highlighted in the resolution. He said that the last year the Helsinki Commission had made repeated and consistent intercessions, including through the OSCE, to draw attention to the deplorable situation in Belarus and to encourage the establishment of a democracy there.

He drew the attention to the allegations about "the Russians brokering an arms deal to rebuild the Iraqi air defenses using the Belarusians as the conduit." "Again, Mr. Speaker, this directly puts our pilots at risk who are trying to enforce the no-fly zone, and I think this resolution again gets this Congress focused on the egregious human rights situation and also the military implications of the Belarusian regime.

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THE REACTION IN BELARUS AND RUSSIA

The Belarus Foreign Ministry called the resolution's assessment of the political situation in Belarus as un-grounded and biased," On May 4, the ministry spokesman said that "The resolution misrepresents the broad civil dialogue now underway in Belarusian society and alleges without any good reason that it is not constructive. . . . The call made by U.S. lawmakers on the [U.S.] executive branch to put pressure on Belarus through Russia's leadership can be considered a flagrant interference into the internal affairs and relations between two sovereign countries."

On May 17, the Lukashenka lower house of parliament condemned the U.S. House resolution and accused the U.S. lawmakers of "deliberate" unwillingness to seek "true information" about the situation in Belarus from the Belarusian legislature or the Belarusian embassy in Washington. The lower house expressed its regret that the U.S. supports the "destructive" Belarusian opposition and demanded that the U.S. administration cease exercising "political, economic, and moral pressure" on Belarus.

As reported by Agence France-Presse, the foreign ministry of Russia issued a communique on May 10 in which it said that the resolution "grossly twists the situation in Belarus and the spirit of Russian-Belarus relations." "It is strange that the US legislators, obstinately ignorant of the facts, maintain without proof that the treaty establishing a union [between Russia and Belarus] will have the effect of damaging the independence of Belarus and its prospects of democracy and of violating Russia's international commitments. " To suggest that pressure should be applied to persuade Moscow to withdraw from this union was "open interference" in Russian internal affairs and in relations between independent states.

According to Itar-TASS (May 18), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarusian-Russian Union issued a statement which said that the resolution "intentionally and blatantly distorts the state of affairs in Belarus, extremely incorrectly interprets relations between Belarus and Russia and the march of the development of Belarusian-Russian integration processes within the framework of the Belarusian-Russian Union."

The Assembly believes that the resolution views "the dynamically developing integration processes in the world economy as applied to the Belarusian Russian Union in a negative light only." The Assembly says that a statement by the U.S. House of Representatives that the union treaty undermines Belarus' sovereignty is absolutely untrue. The Assembly expresses indignation at the strong-worded form of the resolution. The Assembly believes that the resolution's recommendations and calls are aimed at interfering in internal affairs of the two sovereign states and undermining Belarusian-Russian integration. The Assembly says that the resolution is "counterproductive and runs counter to civilized standards of international relations." The Parliamentary Assembly stresses its readiness for a constructive dialogue with the parliaments of all countries, including the US Congress.

Belarusian Opposition Leaders Seek Western Support

Following are excerpts from the International League for Human Rights publication, Belarus Update No. 22, May 2000.

BPF CHAIRMAN VIACHORKA VISITS U.K.

On May 14-19, BPF Chairman Vintsuk Viachorka visited Great Britain at the official invitation of the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BPF Adradzhenne Press Service reported. During the visit, BPF leader met members of the House of Commons of the British Parliament, staff of the East department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Office of the Conservative Party, Royal Institute of the International Affairs, Christ Church College in Oxford, the BBC World Service, the editors-in-chief of the international news departments of The Sunday Times, The Financial Times, and The Guardian. They discussed the human rights situation, democratic process, elections, independence of the media in Belarus, the Lukashenko regime's control of the economy, possibilities of protection the countries independence from Russia and setting up of the Britain-Belarus deputies club. (BPF press service, May 22)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION DELEGATION VISITS U.S.

At the invitation of the New York-based International League for Human Rights, four Belarusian opposition leaders visited the U.S. on May 16-27, traveling to several U.S. cites to meet with emigre community groups, human rights organizations, and the press, then spending a week in Washington, DC, to see U.S. State Department officials and members of the U.S. Congress, notably the chairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Committee on International Affairs, and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Belarusian delegation included Anatoly Lebedko, chair of the 13th Supreme Soviet's Commission on Foreign Affairs and newly elected chair of the United Civic Party; Vintsuk Viachorka, chair of the Belarusian Popular Front Adradzhenne (Renewal Movement); Pavel Zhuk, editor-in-chief of *Nasha Svaboda*, a leading independent newspaper; and Dmitry Bondarenko, coordinator of the Charter 97 civic movement. The purpose of the trip was to discuss conditions for parliamentary elections in Belarus; support of the democratic opposition; the dangers of the Belarus-Russian Union; and the urgent need to put Belarus on the agenda of the Clinton-Putin summit in Moscow in June.

From May 19-21, Lebedko and Viachorka met with Belarusian diaspora and press in New Jersey and Ohio, respectively. Bondarenko and Zhuk traveled to Denver, where they were received by the Colorado Republican Business Coalition and also spoke before an emigre audience at the Glendale Public Library arranged by the Denver Guild of Russian Journalists and *Horizont*, a local newspaper. They also met with Prof. Tom Farer of the University of Colorado, a League board member; were hosted at a luncheon at the Denver Press Club by Holger Jensen, *Rocky Mountain News* international affairs editor; and honored at a fund-raiser for the League arranged by Jean Caldwell, a local business consultant and Democratic Party supporter. On May 22, the Belarusian visitors met with Mark Brzezinski, Director of the Office of Russian, Ukrainian, and Eurasian Affairs of the U.S. National Security Council and spoke at a luncheon arranged by the Heritage Foundation. On May 23, the delegation met with Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR), member of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, who was shocked to see the flyers about disappeared opposition leaders and vowed to support the Belarus resolution on the Senate side.

At a meeting following a Congressional hearing on Russia attended by the Belarusian visitors, Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), chair of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission) and Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) assured

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the opposition leaders that the U.S. Senate is sure to favorably consider H CON Res. 304 RFS on the situation in Belarus, previously passed by the House of Representatives, and now awaiting approval at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

At meetings with Dr. Harold Hongju Koh, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and Amb. Dan Fried, former U.S. envoy to Poland and Acting Special Advisor to the Secretary of State, the Belarusian delegation discussed persistent human rights violations in Belarus and the Belarusian government's failure to meet OSCE conditions for genuine elections. Mary Warlick, director for Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova and John Armstrong, Belarus Desk Officer of the U.S. Department of State, also attended the meetings.

On May 24, the Belarusian delegation met with Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rep. Sam Gejdenson (D-CT), initiator of H. CON RES 304; and also visited former national security advisor Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, in their effort to raise the profile of Belarus in U.S. foreign policy. That evening, at a reception hosted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), former Republican presidential candidate, expressed support for the democratic forces of Belarus, adding that their struggle for freedom had always been welcomed by the U. S. "Belarusians should know that they've got true friends in Washington," noted Sen. McCain. Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman (R-NY), Chair of the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, applauded the Belarusian opposition leaders for their courage in standing up to the illegitimate government of Alexander Lukashenko. The Belarusian opposition leaders were also greeted by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL), member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who stressed the bi-partisan Congressional support for freedom and democracy in Belarus.

In a speech at the IRI reception, Rep. Gilman stated: "The situation in Bela ru s today is nothing less than dictatorship — dictatorship supported by the Russian government. It is shocking that leading opposition figures disappear, that a large police force is deployed against the people, that people are arrested and beaten for no reason, and that the mass media is controlled by the state while the independent press is subject to restrictions and censorship. What is more shocking is that this issue has held such a low place in the agenda between Washington and Moscow. President Clinton should recognize that this dictatorship in Belarus is a cancer that is eating at the heart of our efforts to support democracy not just in that country, but all across the states of the former Soviet Union." The Belarusian visitors also met with the Union of Councils of Soviet Jewry, Voice of America, and Radio Liberty, and conducted a half-day briefing seminar attended by representatives of EU embassies, the State Department, party institutes, NGOs and foundations. (ILHR, May 25)

Clinton Urged to Discuss Belarus with Putin

In a letter released to the press on June 2, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman (R-NY), chair of the House International Relations Committee, urged President Clinton to include the subject of Belarus on the agenda of meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Following is the text of the letter:

The authoritarian government of Alexander Lukashenko continues to repress the development of democracy and a free and open society. The Lukashenko regime has shown no progress in improving the human rights situation in Belarus. In the last year, three leading opposition activists have disappeared, and former prime minister Mikhail Chigir remains under house arrest for "crimes" committed while in office. Moreover, the democratic political opposition will not be able to participate freely and fairly in Belarus' November parliamentary elections unless significant changes are made to the Belarusian electoral code and the opposition is granted access to the state media. The Lukashenko regime has made no indication that such preconditions for opposition participation are forthcoming.

In the meantime, Russia and Belarus are moving forward with plans to create a greater Russian-Belarusian Union, quite possibly a violation of Belarus' sovereignty given the illegitimate nature of the Lukashenko regime. Recent news reports indicate that the Russian Central Bank may lend Belarus $200 million to support the Belarusian ruble and previous reports have estimated that Russian economic subsidies to Belarus reach hundreds of millions of dollars annually. President Putin clearly has significant leverage to press Lukashenko to improve human rights and to establish proper mechanisms for opposition participation in the upcoming elections. We strongly encourage you to ask President Putin to end the Russian government's financial support for the Lukashenko regime, halt the process of "re-integration" of Belarus into Russia, and support the efforts of the OSCE's AMG in Belarus in their efforts to level the playing field for opposition participation in the fall elections.

Mr. President, as you may be aware, on May 3rd the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the atrocities in Belarus and the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko and asking that you take up the issue of Russian support for the Lukashenko regime at the highest levels of the Russian government. We urge you to take the opportunity presented by your meeting with President Putin to act on this request by the Congress. (USIA, June 2, 2000)

Statement of Michael G. Kozak at Senate Committee Confirmation Hearing

The U.S. Senate is required to confirm candidates nominated by the president to serve as U.S. ambassadors in foreign countries. President Clinton nominated Michael G. Kozak to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Belarus. Following is the text of Mr. Kozak 's statement made at the June 6 Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing, chaired by Senator Jesse Helms. A majority vote by the full Senate makes the confirmation final.

Mr. Chairman, it is an honor to be considered by this committee for the opportunity to serve as Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Belarus. I believe that my experience during my almost 29 years in the Department of State could be of use were the Senate to confirm me to this post.

Last Fall I finished a three year assignment in Cuba as the chief of our diplomatic mission in Havana. The policy, operations and security challenges we faced there are quite similar to those our Embassy in Minsk must confront.

Earlier in this Administration, I served as a special negotiator for Haiti. In that capacity, I had the opportunity to work with the various elements of Haitian society in support of efforts to restore democratic processes and to foster the growth of strong independent institutions in the society. I also worked closely with the United Nations, our allies, and interested Members of Congress in trying to find an effective means to support those who shared our democratic goals.

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During the latter part of the Reagan Administration and for most of the Bush Administration, I served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs. In that capacity, I was involved in our efforts to bring about democratic change in Panama, Nicaragua and El Salvador. In this regard, I not only had the experience of working closely with representatives of the countries concerned, but with our own Congress. This experience reinforced my conviction that if we are to succeed abroad, we must have a broad-based, bipartisan consensus in support of our policy at home.

Prior to my service in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Mr. Chairman, I served seventeen years in the Office of the Legal Adviser of the Department of State, ending my career there as Principal Deputy Legal Adviser of the Department. In that capacity, I had the opportunity to participate in many interesting negotiations. But even more importantly, I was able to observe in many different parts of the world just how important the rule of law is to the survival of democracy.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I have had the opportunity to work closely with some of the giants of our diplomatic service, including Ellsworth Bunker, Phil Habib, and Larry Eagleburger, as well as with distinguished elected officials in the Executive Branch and in the Congress. The lessons one learns from observing such people in action are the most valuable of all.

As you know, Belarus is a country that is undergoing a serious constitutional and political crisis. This crisis has been occasioned by the extra-constitutional efforts of the individual elected President in 1994 to extend his term of office and to subordinate all important institutions of the Belarusan state to Executive authority. This effort to return Belarus to the form of government it endured during the Soviet period without question has adversely affected the human rights, economic, and social wellbeing of the Belarusan people. There is also legitimate concern on the part of Belarus' neighbors in Europe that this crisis, if left unattended, could eventually spill over to affect their own interests. And Belarusan support for other hostile regimes clearly affects our own interests. Indeed, members of the staff of this committee, after a recent visit to Belarus, wrote an excellent article, which aptly described that country as "the Cuba of Europe."

When I was told that I was a candidate to serve in Belarus, I began reading reports from our Embassy there, the press, and international non-governmental organizations. What struck me most was how precisely parallel are the means being utilized by the Castro and Lukashenko regimes to control their own people. Apart from the names of the victims, the descriptions of human rights violations in each country are often almost identical. Likewise, the rhetoric of President Lukashenko, accusing NATO and the United States of harboring intentions to invade Belarus, reflects a vintage theme of Fidel Castro. Reports that Belarus may have supplied weapons to Iran and Iraq, if confirmed, would clearly affect adversely our own interests and those of the world community.

Mr. Chairman, I believe there is a strong bipartisan consensus in the Congress and with the Executive Branch that the United States priority in Belarus must be to support the efforts of the Belarusan people and of other interested countries to restore democratic process to that country. Our effort is not to side with one faction or another in the internal politics of Belarus nor is it to try to pick potential winners or losers. Rather, it is to support the restoration and maintenance of democratic processes that will allow the Belarusan people themselves to make those decisions periodically through peaceful means.

If confirmed, Mr. Chairman, I will do my best to continue the great work that our Embassy has been doing to accomplish these goals and to live up to the confidence that you, the members of the Senate, the President, and the great American diplomats and political leaders have placed in me over the years.

Thank you.

Albright Urged to Ensure Personal Safety of Belarus Opposition Leaders

Following is the text of the U.S. Congress Helsinki Commission News Release of June 8, 2000, about a letter Senator Campbell wrote the Secretary of State, expressing Senators' concerns about personal safety of Belarusian opposition leaders who recently met with lawmakers in Washington and now being threatened with reprisals by Lukashenka.

(Washington, DC) - Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) has written Secretary of State Madeline K. Albright voicing "grave concern about the personal safety of leading Belarusian opposition members" with whom he met recently in Washington.

Campbell wrote the letter in light of news reports indicating that the Belarusian leader Aleksander Lukashenka threatened members of the opposition party after their meetings with Washington lawmakers in late May. "Similar threats were issued by President Lukashenka prior to the disappearance of a leading opposition figure last year," Campbell wrote.

Campbell was joined in the letter by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), Commerce, Science and Transportation= Committee Chairman Senator John McCain (R-AZ), and Baltic Caucus Co-Chair Senator Richard J. Durbin (D-IL).

"The democratic opposition in Belarus deserves both our moral and material support as they seek to overcome the legacy of communism and authoritarianism and build a democratic society firmly rooted in the rule of law," Campbell's letter read. "Given the deterioration of human rights in Belarus and in particular repressive measures against the opposition, support for democratic forces in Belarus is more pressing than ever."

In their letter, the Senators called on Albright to release existing State Department program funds "to enhance assistance to the democratic forces in Belarus at this critical juncture."

The four Senators recently met in Washington with leading Belarusian opposition figures including Pavel Zhuk, chief editor of the independent newspaper *Nasha Svaboda*; Anatoly Lebedka, head of the United Civic Party; Dmitry Bondarenko, a leader of the Charter '97 human rights group; and Vintsuk Viachorka, head of the Belarusian Popular Front.

"We therefore urge you to take all available steps to help ensure the personal safety of these Belarusian opposition leaders and to ensure that adequate resources are made available on an urgent basis to support those programs aimed at strengthening independent media, human rights, civil society, independent trade unions and the democratic opposition in Belarus," Campbell added.

The Commission has been active in promoting human rights and democracy in Belarus, and most recently held a hearing in March which featured Belarusian opposition leaders, including Mr. Lebedka. Campbell has met with Mr. Lebedka on several occasions and has actively supported him and other opposition leaders in their efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus.

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THOUGHTS and OBSERVATIONS

Is It Time for the OSCE to Pull out of Belarus?

David R. Marples

The goal of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus (OSCE AMGB) has been to facilitate a dialogue between the government and the opposition. This policy was a one time a credible alternative to isolating and ostracizing the Belarusian president, Alaksandr Łukašenka, whose term in office officially expired on 20 July 1999 according to the original version of the Belarusian Constitution. Recent events suggest that the OSCE AMGB mission has failed: indeed that the OSCE presence in Minsk has been exploited by the president to justify his continuing term in office.

At stake currently are conditions for the holding of new parliamentary elections in autumn. The OSCE AMGB, led by the German diplomat Hans Georg Wieck, has made it plain that the government must allow the opposition access to the official media, and permit conditions such as opposition representatives in the Electoral Commissions. The opposition parties must be seen to have a reasonable chance to get their delegates elected and the parliament that meets subsequently must have some authority.

Łukašenka has made a distinction between his own and the general conception of the opposition and its component parts. On May 30, claiming that he was complying with OSCE AMGB demands, he met with the participants of a "sociopolitical dialogue" that has been arranged by the government, but which excluded the major opposition politicians (other than the Communist Party leader, Syarhey Kalyakin). At that time he promised that amendments to the Electoral Code would be made and sent to the Council of Representatives within a few days. However, he distinguished between the recognized opposition and radical extremists who, he claims, are trying to overthrow his government using funds from the West.

The Belarusian government has promoted a discernible policy of dividing the EU and its United States ally. The OSCE AMGB is German led and its policies seem quite close to the views of the influential German Ambassador in Minsk, Horst Winkelmann, who served at the Germany Embassy in Moscow during the Gorbachev period. Mr. Winkelmann maintains that it is critical for diplomats to deal with the government in power, no matter what problems that government may have and even if it has violated the Constitution or taken repressive actions against its opponents.

The dialogue initiated by Mr. Wieck represents similar tactics: to bring the president to the drawing board along with the main figures of the opposition "the numbers need to be limited to accelerate the process" and reach an agreement that would allow for the return of democracy to Belarus. However, the Belarusian president has paid lip service to the OSCE presence in Minsk, while using the concept of a Dialogue to push an agenda that includes both alienation of the main figures of the opposition and the reduction of the influence of the United States in this part of Eastern Europe.

In reality, the differences between German (in particular) and the United States' policy toward Belarus remain unspoken, though they clearly exist. After the departure of the US and major European Ambassadors from Minsk after the Drazdy affair, the Europeans quickly returned their representatives while the US delayed the return of Ambassador Daniel Speckhard for two years. An apparent lack of unity among the Western nations provided an opportunity for Lukashenka to try to create a rift. He has always made the distinction, for example, between a hostile NATO and a friendly OSCE, labelling the latter as a virtual opposition to the military alliance.

The US Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) invited two major figures of the opposition, Stanislau Šuškievič, the former Speaker of the parliament and ipso facto leader of Belarus at the time of independence, and Siamion Šarecki, the Chairman of the parliament of the 13th session (dissolved by the president in late 1996, but still meeting privately), to testify at its hearing on Belarus held in March. Subsequently, on May 3, the US House of Representatives, in a 409-2 vote, passed a strongly worded resolution condemning the Łukašenka regime for its human rights violations, called on the Belarusian government to engage in a dialogue with the opposition, and called on Russia to respect the sovereignty of Belarus. In the second half of May, a 4-member opposition, including Vincuk Viačorka, the youthful new chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, visited Washington where they met with State Department officials and members of the US Congress, including the chairmen of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House International Relations Committee. All three figures are despised by the president and considered being dangerous to his goals.

Šuškievič, though on the fringes of political life and without a popular following, has more international credibility than Łukašenka as a result of his short term as a national leader (1991-January 1994). Šarecki, according to the 1994 Constitution, as parliamentary leader took over the mantle of interim president when Łukašenka's term expired. At this same time, fearing for his life, he first sheltered in the OSCE AMGB headquarters and subsequently fled over the border to Vilnius, Lithuania. He remains in exile. Viačorka has been a major supporter of the demonstrations in the spring of 2000 against the Łukašenka government, particularly a 5000-strong protest to commemorate the anniversary of the independent state of 1918, held on March 25, at which there were mass arrests.

Neither the above figures, nor Łukašenka's old nemesis, the leader of the Christian Conservative Party of the BPF, Zianon Paźniak, at present represents an electoral threat to Łukašenka. Within the country, the most popular opponent remains former Premier Mikhail Čyhir, who was arrested last year on charges of embezzlement during an opposition campaign for a presidential election. On May 19, Čyhir was given a 3-year suspended prison sentence and a $220,000 fine after a trial in which he was accused of financial misdeeds, and which appears to have been politically motivated. However, the fact that his prominent opponents were guests of the US government provoked and irritated Łukašenka, who has never been invited by the United States or indeed any of the Western European governments to pay a state visit. (Notably President Clinton's recent visit to Moscow and Kyiv bypassed Minsk, in contrast to his January 1994 visit when Šuškievič was running the country.) Łukašenka maintained that the travelers would be regarded as potentially subversive elements that were seeking foreign support to overthrow his government.

The United States also aroused the anger of the president when the newly appointed Ambassador, Michael Kozak, formerly Ambassador to Cuba, compared Belarus to the long time Communist island. On June 8, Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikalay Barysevič denounced the "incorrect statements" of the new Ambassador. In many ways the comparison does seem farfetched, but the statement symbolizes the hardening of the US attitude toward Belarus and intolerance of the continuing repressive tactics of the Lukashenka government. US senators have also warned the Belarusian government not to punish the opposition leaders who visited Washington.

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Conceivably, the harsher US attitude toward Belarus should now prevail over the conciliatory tactics of the OSCE AMGB and German Embassy. The latter tactics appear to have failed. Lukashenka has made no concessions despite dozens of meetings; the opposition may be slightly more united than in the past, but it has not succeeded in gaining influence over the electorate, particularly since the government has retained its monopoly over the media and continues to harass opposition voices, such as the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*. Further, the regular talks with the OSCE — at the time of writing an OSCE, Council of Europe, and European parliament was about to arrive in Minsk (June 19-22) following the visit of a 3-person OSCE team on May 4 — have provided the president with a certain amount of credibility, despite constant expressions of OSCE concerns about the lack of change.

One could argue that international representatives in Belarus must deal primarily with the government in office. However, that government is no longer recognized as legal and it has as yet taken no steps to ensure that there will be democratic elections (the most likely date seems to be early October) even though the time for campaigning has clearly begun. Further, as the economy slips into what seems to be an inexorable decline, many voters recognize that the Lukashenka government is unlikely to retrieve the country from this situation. A recent poll indicated that although no opposition figure would receive more than 4% of the vote were a presidential election cam paign to be held on the spot, the president himself now commands the support of only 10% of those polled (Belarus Today, June 16, 2000). The president's popularity is declining steadily.

US policy represents a sharp alternative to OSCE AMGB policy. The comparison to Cuba has broader implications than mere politics: it implies also a moribund economic backwater with a president who is clearly past his time. There can be few illusions that the US will want any form of dialogue with Lukashenka in the near future. The stumbling block in this policy, however, is the lack of influence of the opposition politicians among the Belarusian public. None of the prominent opposition politicians — Šuškievič, Šarecki, Viačorka, newly reelected Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" leader Mikalaj Statkievič, Paźniak, and others — has much influence at present outside the confines of the capital city.

When the Convention of Democratic Forces meets as scheduled in July, therefore, it is essential that the leading figures bury their differences and elect a leader that can unite political forces from left to right and who is prepared to sacrifice or delay a political platform until the first priority has been achieved: that of democratic parliamentary and then presidential elections (2001) and the restoration of a democratic regime in Belarus. The time for a united campaign is particularly ripe: there are indications that Łukšenka has not achieved the sort of rapport with new Russian president Vladimir Putin that he had with the more affable Boris Yeltsin. The Belarusian president is no longer able to play the "Russian card" with the electorate, particularly given Putin's strong centralizing tendencies exhibited during his first few months in office. The Union with Russia seems more likely to render Belarus a western region of Russia rather than an equal partner.

In the meantime, the OSCE AMGB would best serve the ultimate goal of a democratic Belarus by abandoning the fiction of a Dialogue and progressive changes through debate and discussion with a government that clearly has treated the whole process with cynicism and disdain. If the Mission were to leave Minsk it would deprive the government of a Western sounding board. But it would also be an indication to the Lukashenka presidency that the policies of repression, of violating the Constitution, and of creating a Central Asian type dictatorship in the center of Europe are unacceptable to the West. It would also of course be tantamount to an admission of failure. But one can append to the Mission the old adage that it is better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all.

David R. Marples is a professor of history at the University of Alberta, and author of Belarus: A Denationalized Nation *(1999).*

Belarus: Self-Identification and Statehood

By Stanislau Šuškievič

After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus made an attempt to find its way to national statehood, to non-nuclear status, neutrality, an open society, and a liberalized economy. Today it is a zone of communist revenge. The questions to be asked and resolved are: to what extent is the situation special, and what are the prospects for the country becoming a democratic and sovereign one?

Tortuous Way to Independence

Belarusians are one of the oldest Slav nations in Europe; Belarusian statehood began at the start of the second millennium; Belarusian Christianity is more than 1000 years old. For a long time, Belarus was part of a federal state - the Grand Duchy of Lithuania - and had a great influence. Belarusian was a state language; in the 16th century, it was used to write a legal code - the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania - one of the first constitutions in Europe.

Powerful neighbors always intended to conquer Belarus. Some 200 years ago, the territory of Belarus was incorporated into the Russian empire. The Belarusian language was forbidden and rebellions of Belarusians against Russians were brutally suppressed.

Anti-Belarusian pressure weakened only for a short period in the beginning of the 20th century, when a revolutionary movement in Russia began to endanger the monarchy. On the 25th of March in 1918, Belarusians declared creation of their own state - the Belarusian People's Republic. However, it was soon destroyed by the Bolsheviks who, in 1919, formed their own Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, which in 1922 became one of the founders of the USSR.

In the thirties, under the banner of a struggle with nationalism and counterrevolution, the Bolsheviks started a planned destruction of the Belarusian intelligentsia. In 1937-39, tens of thousands of the most educated Belarusians were killed or deported. Documents prove that more than 370 poets, writers, journalists, philologists, and historians who wrote in Belarusian were shot. A national intelligentsia has been always antithetical to Bolshevism, and the same numbers of its representatives were killed both in Ukraine and in Russia; however, their populations were correspondingly 5 and 15 times larger at that time.

But even this period was not the climax for Belarus' troubles: during World War II, Belarus lost a quarter of its citizens; in the Afghan war, Belarus lost more lives per capita than any other Soviet republic; as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant station explosion, more than 70% of the radioactive fallout was on Belarus.

For many ages, Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, and Jews lived on Belarusian land, and under no circumstances did Belarusians regard these peoples as a reason for the Belarusians' own difficulties and problems. However, this tolerance has been purposely abused. The percent of Russians living in the prewar Belarus was 3%, but

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this number has grown to almost 20% in 1990. At the same time, Belarusian youth was permanently relocated to "build communism" in the Kazakh virgin lands, in Siberia, the Far East and the Far North.

A new attempt to revive Belarusian statehood was made on the 27th of July in 1990, when the Supreme Council (Parliament) adopted a declaration on national sovereignty. However, de jure independence came to Belarus in December 1991, and since that time, it has been formally recognized by Russia, which ratified the Belavezha agreement.

Belarusians have returned to their sovereignty with an emasculated national intelligentsia and a population that to a large extent has lost a feeling of national self-identification, mainly because of compulsory russification.

Russian Pretensions

The interests of Russia with respect to Belarus are formulated explicitly in the theses of the Council on Foreign and Defense Politics of the Russian Federation: "to oppose the NATO expansion to the east"; "remove the potential threat of creating the so-called Black-and-Baltic Sea Belt which would isolate Russia"; "improve Russiaís military potential by integrating with the Belarusian army"; "remove Kaliningrad's special defense region from military and strategic isolation"; "ensure the integration of the two armies into a single system with a single command and control structure"; and "develop a unified, powerful military industrial complex".

Russia does not hide its intention to incorporate Belarus, although Russia calls it "unification." It is said directly and cynically that "there should not be any delay in this matter" and that "one should even pay a certain economic price for such a profitable geopolitical union." And "since the processes of restoring national self-consciousness are being accelerated in Belarus, time is working in favor of the opponents of 'integration.' So, the unification process should be sped up." Anxiety among the Belarusian people, such as poor economic conditions, an increase in crime, and the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster should be exploited. In other words, the goal is to expand the Russian empire by suppressing the national self-awareness of the Belarusian people and taking advantage of Belarus' impoverishment.

One cannot deny that Russian society is obsessed with the adulation of a unitary state and imperial ambitions. There is some hope though that the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, will depart from his pro-imperial statements he made prior to the presidential election. In his New Year's article, Putin admitted that the standard of living of the average Russian is ten times lower than that of the average American, that the Russian GDP is five times lower than that of China, and that even under the most favorable conditions, the average Russian will reach the standard of living of today's average Portuguese citizen in 15-20 years. And yet he pretends that Russia will become a model in the field of economic progress.

The Russians would not publicly state that the imperial attitude of Russia is today based solely on nuclear weapons. They donít want to admit that to maintain and update weapons readiness so as to support a level of mutual assured destruction it would be necessary to tax an ordinary Russian to such an extent that would not allow any improvement in the economy or any growth in the standard of living. Therefore, the underlying idea of Putin's article must have been: either well-being, or imperial grandeur with poverty. But had Putin rejected Russiaís imperial intentions for the sake of the well-being of Russians, his chances for being elected president of Russia would have been imperiled.

Putin signed decree No. 24 of January 10, 2000, which confirmed the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. According to this decree, Russia will oppose domination by Western countries, led by the United States; the attempts to ignore Russia's interests "can undermine international security and stability." Translated into the language that is clear to everyone, this means: "We are weak, we are poor, but we are great and therefore we can set an example of how to live, and one who does not understand this, undermines international security."

A power which relies on such controversial postulates and at the same time preserves internal political stability in the country, can only be a dictatorship. What is the probability that, after strengthening his power through elections, a dictator will follow a path of developing a peaceful economy for the sake of the well-being of ordinary Russians? Strangely, there is some hope that during Putin's presidency, Russia will emerge into a market economy and civil society as a result of one positive attribute of KGB employees, which was pointed out by Andrei Sakharov: they are less corrupt and more professional since, in their institution, professionalism is necessary.

However, the doubts remain, and the Belarusian experience only strengthens them. Some people who backed Lukashenka thought that he could be manipulated into doing what they want by making him a figurehead because he is ignorant of the rudiments of politics and economics. The opposite has happened.

Belarusian Society and Power

Adherents of independence in Belarus have never been adversaries of Russia. They understand that societal relations in Russia are more democratic today than those in Belarus, and that the economy is more liberalized. But they know all too well that to walk hand-in-hand towards economic reform together with a huge and poorly governed Russia is similar to joining a herd, where it is unknown in which direction the herd will turn.

Belarus' regime is a dictatorship, although the so-called "Constitution-96" proclaims such platitudes as a "parliament," "legal opposition," "freedom of speech," and even the "principle of separation of powers."

Political opposition and independent media formally exist but they cannot influence the situation effectively, since the regime suppresses their activities through violence, intimidation, and undisguised political terror. Belarus has become a police state: it has 125,000 militiamen and 85,000 military servicemen. With a population of 10 million, this force is proportionally the largest one in Europe in terms of the per capita number of people in power structures. Known political leaders are disappearing; members of parliament, who have parliamentary immunity, are arrested; independent attorneys are deprived of the right to defend their clients in court; and legal procedures are turned into a farce.

And Russian leadership actively supports this state of affairs. A set of six treaties signed between April 1996 and December 1999, concerning integration, the creation of common institutions, and, finally, formation of a union between Belarus and Russia, is, strictly speaking, a collection of statements of intentions. However, together with the sound of bells and the breaking of crystal goblets in the Hall of Facets in the Kremlin, this dulls anxiety about the war in Chechnya, the neglect of economic difficulties, as well as the furtherance of general Russian disorganization.

Belarusian Economics

The Belarusian regime declared that, in 1997, there was a growth of 10% in GDP, 17.6% in industrial production, 19.5% in investments, and 5% in real income. Economists very quickly understood that this was a bluff, and the "miracle of 1998" - GDP growth of 11% - has not been taken seriously

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by anyone. It is impossible to hide economic crisis in Belarus. In 1999, inflation was 350%. The Belarusian ruble has depreciated by more than 225 times with respect to the Russian ruble. The Lukashenka regime declared that, in 1998, the percent of citizens with an income lower than a living wage fell from 83% to 27%. This is simply a propaganda bluff: this reduction was made by introducing a new and reduced benchmark. The actual monthly minimal income per capita in 1998 was equal to 2 US$, and the average income was 37 US$. For comparison: in neighboring Lithuania, in June of the same year, the parallel figures were equal to 105 US$ and 250 US$, respectively.

The Russian leadership continues supporting the regime in Belarus despite its own economic difficulties. The dream of incorporating Belarus into the Russian Federation has become the only factor which unites all political forces and movements in Russia that otherwise are at loggerheads with each other, from communists and fascists to democrats and free market adherents. The amorality of such an approach is evident. Using it, Lukashenka flirts with both Russian "reds" and "browns," many times insulting Yeltsin publicly. People close to Russian President Yeltsin had to pacify him with the traditional words: "It is not a tsar's business to pay attention to the vanity of low-level leaders."

The Road to Democracy

There are three main models of transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The fastest one - displacement - presupposes an essential preponderance of opposition over the government. An example of this type of transition is the "velvet revolution" of 1990 in Czechoslovakia. This version is improbable in today's Belarus, since one can get the support of the majority of the population only by an offensive propaganda campaign, which requires electronic media outlets that are absolutely inaccessible to the opposition. Moreover, its viability is weakened by a stratum that has turned "oppositeness" into a profitable business due to the grants of Western foundations. Some of these people are implanted into the opposition by the regime's special services.

Another model is transformation. It can be possible even when the opposition is weaker than the government. To accomplish this, it is necessary to have a considerable stratum of reformers in ruling circles. This was the case, e.g., in Spain in 1975-77. Unfortunately, this model also has no prospect for success in Belarus where there is no "party of power," and moreover, its reforming wing is absent. The regime relies upon people who are either personally loyal to the dictator or depend on him, but not upon thoughtful specialists. Those who threaten the regime are expelled from the government immediately; the dictator himself will never accept democratization.

A mixed model seems to be more promising. Opinion polls confirm that the level of confidence in the government is decreasing. The absence of any hope for economic prosperity is understood by a large part of the state bureaucracy. It does not feel itself protected; it is insecure: at any moment, at the dictator's whim, any functionary can become jobless or even find himself in handcuffs. Under conditions of international isolation, and without Western economic assistance, Belarus will never be able to overcome the crisis. Therefore, an overwhelming majority of state civil servants are interested in the dictatorship's failure. This is true of the power structure's employees as well. Should the opposition shake up an active part of society, and the bureaucracy understand that the regime is not eternal, and that they have to think about their own future, then this could change the situation radically. Under these circumstances, support for democratic transformations in Belarus by the international community would become the most important factor.

International Efforts

On September 18, 1997, the OSCE Standing Committee established the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in Belarus. The AMG began its work in Minsk in January 1998. The repression of human rights and media monopolization by the state was harshly condemned at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul by the leaders of some countries. Similar condemnation was also voiced in the Istanbul OSCE Declaration.

The OSCE member states have agreed that elections in Belarus can be recognized only under the condition that electoral legislation is adopted as a result of a dialogue with the opposition, and which provides for the independence of and pluralistic membership in electoral commissions, which also can be reached only through negotiations.

However, the OSCE Rules of Procedure do not permit an effective influence upon the regime, which is against democratization. The AMG's efforts brought about a common approach to the negotiations, but they had the effect of distracting the opposition parties' attention from other forms of confrontation and, therefore, have become counterproductive.

Prospects

Building a nation that has its own language, culture, literature, and traditions, including statehood ones, can hardly be stopped. Belarus will become a legal democratic state with a developed civil society. However, without breaking through the information blockade, this process will take too long. The international community is sparing in assistance with resources for this breakthrough and, in fact, has abandoned Belarus to be mauled by the Russians.

The Belarusian democratic opposition is aware of how difficult it is to overcome an economic deadlock over time. We know that an economic "miracle," i.e., acceleration of economic development, can take place only as a result of large foreign investments. There are enough factors in Belarus that favor highly profitable investments: an excellent geographical location and inexpensive, highly qualified, and disciplined labor. Internal political forces in Belarus, with Western support for education and training, will stimulate transition to democracy and political stability. The West should be convinced to introduce a new "Marshall plan" for Belarus.

A less optimistic prediction takes into account the intention of Russia to return Ukraine and Belarus back to a Russian empire, going as far back as the beginning of their de jure independence, i.e., when the President of Russia signed the Belavezha agreement. For Yeltsin, the main incentive for signing was a desire to become the rightful Russian President. It is possible that he was confident that the other CIS states would not be able to survive without Russia, and that sooner or later, they would return into it. Ukraine has rejected this option definitively. In Belarus, pro-Russian imperial forces took power through rough Russian intervention. Today, they are convinced that preparation for incorporation of Belarus into the Russian Federation is complete, since:

* six treaties concerning integration, while they do not represent a legal basis for incorporation, nonetheless quantitatively demonstrate how far the process has advanced;
* 1560 kilometers of the Belarus-Russian border are absolutely porous;
* the Belarusian economy is in crisis and completely dependent on Russia;
* all key positions in the government - the prime minister, the vice prime minister for economics, the ministers of defense,

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interior, foreign affairs, and the KGB chairmanship are occupied by Russians;

* practically all political forces in Russia, including *"Yabloko"* are supporting the incorporation of Belarus into the Russian Federation; *Yabloko* assisted in forming one of the most anti-Belarusian NGOs - *"Belarusian Yabloko"*;

* all electronic, and the overwhelming majority of the printed media, are monopolized by the regime.

Predictions of political scientists for the near future of Russia can be reduced to the words: "dictatorship is coming." Russia will need tangible achievements and victories. But there will be no victory in Chechnya. It is impossible to make Chechens love a country which brought them only destruction and suffering and suppressed a popular partisan movement. Russian intellectuals would not help. For 200 years, they have transformed an "ill-natured Chechen with a dagger" into a bandit, since he was fighting against enemy conscripts without adhering to the norms of war. And how would one explain the artillery salvos and carpet bombing of populated areas? There also will be no quick achievements with respect to the national economy: it is extremely difficult to unite the Duma's politicians around the reformer's team and to deprive oligarchs of the ability to plunder.

And so, only Belarus remains being a convenient target. Here it is possible either to establish "unification" by decree or to hold a referendum, the results of which would be equal to the results of Hitler's referendums with respect to Austria or Czechoslovakia.

What next? To draw another state to Russia's own huge but unregulated mess means to assume responsibility for all the complex problems that will arise in the subject country. If the postwar story of the imposition of Russian socialism brought about a situation where not only Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Hungarians, but also Czechs, Romanians, and even Bulgarians ceased to love Russians, the same disease may spread to Belarus. Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia became independent as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Belarus will attain its real independence as a result of the disintegration of Russia. The incorporation of Belarus will only accelerate this disintegration.

Stanislau Šuškievič, a physicist by education and a full professor, was elected chairman (speaker) of the 12th Supreme Council (parliament) of Belarus in the wake of the August 1991 putsch in Moscow. In this capacity, as head of state, he signed the Belavezha Agreement with the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in December 1991, dissolving the Soviet Union. In January 1994, he was deposed by the communist majority of parliament. In 1995 he was elected to the 13th Supreme Council, which was disbanded by President Luka šenka but still is being recognized by the Western powers as Belarusi legal parliament. In 1998 he was elected chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Union and is active in the democratic opposition.

BELARUS' FORUM

In a Common Harness

By Ludmila Hraznova

From time to time there arouses interest for Belarus and its problems in the world community. Today they once again take a look from the international political kitchen at the country, located in between Russia and Poland.

Such episodic West's attention to the Belarusian problems isn't accidental. The world wishes to get to know more about Belarus and the will of its people, as far as they got absolutely no idea of what it is like. There exists a so-to-say difficulty of Belarus national identification. Is it a satellite-state or an independent one? Totalitarian or democratic? With administrative or rather market-oriented economy? Asian or European? Due to this identification problem Western politicians quite often adopt an awkward policy in relations with Belarus.

There exists a more crucial problem in present-day Belarus, the one called "self identification". Belarusians haven't yet decided who they are and which way they want to follow. They are standing at the crossroads in all senses: national, economic, governmental and historical. The society is split up into the supporters of Russia-Belarus integration and those of the sovereign development; those who shout for the Soviet-type economy and market one; the Russia-oriented people and Westernizers. Slow, unclear and unidentified consciousness of the Belarusian nation was taken advantage of by the manipulator and populist, who gave himself sweeping powers on the territory in between Russia and Poland.

Over ten years ago Belarusians obtained a statehood and national history of their own. To a great degree this happened thanks to the favorable exterior factors: Russian intelligentsia ideologically killed the communist regime in the USSR; military coup failed, resulting in the proclamation of independence in former Soviet republics; economic problems forced the newly proclaimed states to seek the way out independently; Belarus finally received independence and state sovereignty.

History of the late 80s — early 90s gave us a gift — a country of our own. We acquired a national flag and coat of arms, symbolizing a new historical landmark — non communist, non-administrative, non-Russian but our own. It goes without saying that Belarusians paid certain price. In 1988 there was held the very first massive action, marking the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression in Kurapaty. In 1991 the country was rocked by April protests, people blocked the roads. One hundred thousand strong crowd took to the streets, protesting against the price growth. But the price we paid was nothing as compared to those, paid by the Russians and the Ukrainians — dissidents, who spent their lives in prisons, intelligentsia, which never till recently enjoyed recognition from its own nation. The Baltic states paid with human lives.

A new historical landmark, which we got instead of the communist deadlock at a comparatively low cost, has never been appreciated by the Belarusians at its true value. Nor has it been used in a proper way. It is not the nation to blame for, but rather the ruling elite and opposition. The people, free from communist mythology but still lacking new mentality, were a shapeless mass, which could be swung either way. Neither those in power, nor their opponents succeeded in using the anti-communist feelings to launch a kind revolution, as their western neighbors had previously done.

The ruling elite and opposition failed because they had no clue where to lead the country and didn't have enough political will. Those days' leadership, with Mr. Kebich at the head, was sitting on two chairs. They were still doubtful about independence (they had a country,

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but lived on Russian donations), about the state system (with communism already gone, democracy hasn't been yet installed), about economic transformations (they were thrown out of the Soviet economy but still afraid to go market), about foreign relations orientation (there emerged a border with Russia, but the western border remained shut). Passive Belarusian bureaucrats didn't know what to do w ith the steering wheel and how to drive the country out of the impasse. So they left it to the mercy of fate.

In that chaotic situation opposition could have well taken the power, getting it out of the dirt in which it had been plunged. But it never did so. It overestimated Belarusian national peculiarities, it put the nation's democratic revival into dependence from its national renaissance movement. The Baltic variant of the "song" revolution didn't work here. Moreover, amateurish policy of Belarusization provoked the growth of people's discontent. Opposition has also overestimated the democratic standards of its voters. At country's first ever presidential race it nominated two candidacies — Šuškievič and Paźniak. That was simply too much for the people. Nationally-concerned population voted for Paźniak, whereas democratically-oriented folks supported Šuškievič. As a result, they got nothing at all.

Opposition failed to manifest the appropriate political will and organizational abilities, though it could have followed the Czech experience, setting up a coalition government, entering the round table with the authorities, as the Poles once did. At that moment they thought that bringing down the regime of Kebich was possible without concerted efforts. The period of unexpected historical gift and missed democratic chances, which started in the year 1991, ended up in frustration in 1994, when the power was picked up by a person who at least possessed enough political will.

A few years of Belarusian thaw were over now and the country started rolling back to the Soviet past. Restoration of the old system by Łukašenka all of a sudden met strong resistance by the MPs from the 13th Supreme Soviet. Bureaucratic and pro-communist deputies who had never been taken seriously by Łukašenka, stood up to his arbitrariness and even collected the necessary amount of signatures to impeach him out of the office.

The uniqueness of the situation was that the opposition motion against Łukašenka united deputies with opposite political background — communist, liberal, social democratic. Their unity was mostly achieved due to the arbitrariness and lawlessness of the head of state. But not only this factor separated the president and the Supreme Soviet.

The statehood and the country's sovereignty was at stake, becoming another barrier between these two forces. Chernomyrdin, Seleznev and Stroev on that notorious November night rescued Łukašenka and their northwestern satellite, rather than Šarecki and independent Belarus. It is true that at that time the Supreme Soviet voted in favor of the Commonwealth of the two states, fearing and misunderstanding the value of the sovereignty. In 1996 the Supreme Soviet joined a risky integration game. Only after Šarecki got betrayed by his Russian "colleagues", the Chair and many other deputies turned away from Moscow in repentance. On these, tragic for the Belarusian demo cracy, days in November 1996, opposition didn't have enough power to provide the Supreme Soviet with the necessary support. Both the executive's extreme insolence and lack of coordination among opposition led to the constitutional coup, which legalized personal powers of Lukashenka.

November 1996 symbolizes the lowest temperature on the scale of our country's democratic thermometer. Dissolved Supreme Soviet and disunited opposition were suffering from the consequences of their defeat. The opposite side celebrated their victory and already started to put together the spare parts of the old Soviet mechanism. Belarusians were told that they would not be led after the civilized world, which meant loss of the state sovereignty and Belarusian national symbols — language, history, flag, coat of arms and, of course, impoverished economy. The nation felt the first delights of communist comeback. The salaries started growing smaller and smaller, the state-controlled economy suffered severe decline, the foreign relations left much to be desired, as well. People felt sorry for their nation and themselves. Official propaganda promoted its ideology, whereas empty stomachs begged for food. Economy turned out to be Łukašenka's unstoppable adversary and the closest ally of opposition.

The year 1998 we breathed in the first gulp of the fresh wind of change. Political landscape and orientation of the Belarusian nation switched over to the national democratic values. In order to present themselves before the nation as a real alternative to the government, opposition badly needed joint efforts, coordinated activities and unity.

Parallel with the awakening of people, opposition came back to its normal state of mind and strength to act on a joint basis. Starting from the freezing January 24, 1998 the temperature on a democratic thermometer began to slowly move up the scale. That was the day when they held the Congress of democratic forces and mass action in its support. Some seven thousand dissenters walked around the city in a - 20C degrees frost and staged a small meeting. Consolidation of opposition forces accelerated following the strange death of Karpenka and Pechorsky, disappearances of Zakharenka and Gonchar. New-wave opposition leaders, having suppressed personal ambitions, started playing a team game. They suddenly realized that they are sitting in one boat which one should not swing for it may easily overturn. Opposition's ideological work became more elaborate, the national ideals no longer overshadowed the democratic ones and vice versa. They also worked out country's strategy in foreign relations: the number of contacts with Moscow substantially went down, whereas more visits were now paid to the Western world.

It took Belarus opposition two years of hard work to make the world notice the escalation of political temperature in the country. Alternative presidential elections, run by the opposition in 1999, attracted the West's attention, though they didn't make any conclusions from that. Only October 17, 1999, 30-thousand rally made Western diplomats for the first time speak about Belarus in terms of it people and their thirst for democracy. Endless TV coverage testified to the planet that Belarusians of all generations wish to be a free and independent European country. The centers of world politics decided that it was too early to bury Belarus and that its citizens' desire for freedom at least needs to be encouraged.

So far, the world knew about Belarus because of Chernobyl and Łukašenka. But these symbols cause sad feelings. Some nations reveal themselves to the world through their history. But the history of Belarusians has been rewritten so many times and so many times have the conquerors annihilated its national legacy that

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it didn't work with them. Other nations show themselves to others through their literature and art. As for the Belarusian writers, painters and composers, they are more frequently presented as either Russian, Polish or Lithuanian.

The major misfortune of all Belarusians is that they are living on the boundary of two civilizations and, thus, carry the burden of everlasting transition and uncertainty. But this drawback of theirs may well develop into an advantage in the contemporary world. National-democratic values are intensively preferred by the most active and promising stratum of the society — youth. The Belarusian language, sort of as a forbidden fruit, turned in to a vogue; free market relations — into a natural dream of all more or less educated people. As the famous proverb goes: "We do not protect what we have, but we weep over it when we lose it". The electoral procedure is perceived by many, especially nihilists, as an integral human right. Belarusians are experiencing both spiritual changes and democracy development.

We need to put more emphasis on this last statement, in order not to be tempted into an illusion of real democratic transformations in the society. The totalitarian yoke is far from destruction. All branches of power are concentrated in the hands of one person. Everything in this country depends on the will of its leader. He neither wishes to follow the civilized world, nor does he open himself to this world. What can we say then about elections into the parliament under such tough conditions? Realizing this, opposition is not intending to become a fig leaf on the naked body of the authoritarian regime. The authorities, in their turn, along with some Western diplomats, who consider the elections just another natural step forward, attempt to overcome opposition's unity by dragging them into some doubtful pseudo-talks.

We first need to distinguish real elections and false ones. The first take place in a democratic society, while the second — under authoritarian rule, where, as pinpointed by Stalin, "it doesn't matter who votes, it matters who counts." Such elections do not change anything and we have a good proof for that. Łukašenka's parliament has been operating for the past few years. It is more of a president's office, registering his personal decrees, rather than a sound legislative branch of power.

As long as the government doesn't guarantee country's democratic development, any advice to legitimize it are immature. For those, who really feel compassion with us and acknowledge our drastic plight, I'd like to draw a parallel between present-day Belarus and Poland at the time of "Solidarnosc" movement. One should identify us as if we were Poles of that period and, consequently, apply the same approaches to resolve the political crisis in Belarus. We don't need forty years to settle it down, as had been the case with Moses and the Jewish nation long ago. All we need is concerted efforts of both opposition and its counterparts on the basis of true identification of the Belarusian nation. (Charter 97, May 26, 2000)

Ludmila Hraznova (Gryaznova) is a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet (Council) and member of Charter '97', active in the democratic opposition in Belarus.

Belarusian Opposition Leaders Meet Secretary Albright

"By the year 2025 there should be no more dictatorships on the face of the Earth," said Anatoly Lebedko at the press-conference held June 28 in Minsk and dedicated to the results of the recent high-level meetings of the united opposition delegation from Belarus. The delegates — Ludmila Gryaznova, Anatoly Lebedko, Vintsuk Vyachorka, Dmitry Bondarenko and Nina Stuzhinskaya — returned from the Warsaw conference ìWorld Forum on Democracyî during which they managed to meet with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and George Soros, a prominent businessman.

As pointed out by UCP Chair A. Lebedko, their meeting with Secretary Albright and her approval of the policies of the democratic forces in Belarus are an important event in the history of the contemporary Belarus. According to Mr. Lebedko, the democratic circles of Belarus now rest on two feet beyond the ocean, the feet symbolizing the Congress and the State Secretary. In his turn, BPF Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka added that for an object not to be shaky it needs a third leg, the support of the European structures, which is still in perspective. The discussion with the Secretary centered on the political situation in Belarus and non-recognition by the US and Europe of the autumn parliamentary elections. Mrs. Albright noted that in comparison with their Serbian colleagues, Belarus opposition represents a united force, whereas the Serbs in opposition are still split into the minor groups.

The conversation with George Soros lasted for two hours, exceeding the usual official 30-minute time limit. The businessman was especially interested in the present-day ongoing processes in Russia. He named Belarus as one of those countries falling in the category of the so-called ìdictatorships in disguise,î where the necessary democratic bodies exist on paper, while the true power is concentrated in the hands of one.

Next step for the united Belarus opposition, according to Anatoly Lebedko, will be their participation in the Bucharest OSCE PA session, scheduled for July 6-10. The opposition delegates will propose amendments to the Severinìs resolution on Belarus and hope to get a unanimous vote in their favor. However, things won't be so easy with the powerful Russian delegation, guided by Speaker Seleznev, heading for Romania to confront them. (Charter '97, June 28, 2000)

Belarus Media Analysis

ProMedia (the Professional Media Program), implemented by IREX (Internat ional Research & Exchanges Board) and funded by USAID, has been assisting independent print, radio and television in Central and Eastern Europe since 1995.

ProMedia operates in Belarus since Apri 1 1997 providing assistance to independent print and broadcast media. The program offers technical assistance, as well as limited financial assistance, by offering services and products on a no-cost basis, to maintain and strengthen the current legal and financial status of independent media, improve the professional skills of media owners and employees--including publishers, accountants, sales professionals and journalists -- and increase the media's access to information from Belarusian and international sources.

Following are excerpts from an April 2000 Belarus media analysis prepared by ProMedia,

Before Lukashenkoìs election in 1994, the state exercised loose control over the countryìs media. There was one private TV channel in Minsk, a dozen local TV stations throughout the country, and one truly independent FM radio station. Most of the newspapers, even those owned by the state, gave space to people representing different points of view. However, since

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his election, Lukashenko has increasingly subjected Belarusian media to rigorous censorship, intimidation, and manipulation. Today, state media dominate the landscape. Independent newspapers have comparatively small press runs — the largest independent daily, *Narodnaya Volya*, has a circulation of 45,000. *Sovietskaya Belarus*, the largest state paper, has a 304,000 press run. There are fewer than 20 independent television stations in Belarus, loosely banded together by TBN (Belarus Television Network). The independent media outlets that do exist experience administrative and regulatory duress, seriously curtailing their ability to operate freely. Journalists are routinely harassed and independent media outlets are under threat of having their registration revoked and their finances subjected to tax inspections. Thus, Belarusians find it increasingly difficult to receive objective and fact-based information about the events inside the country and from around the world.

Following is a comparison of Belarus' media sector with that of the ideal, high-functioning media system represent by grade 4 on the scale of 0 to 4 (see grading key at the end of this analysis).)

1. Independent media lack the skills necessary to operate as viable business concerns: grade 0

Overall, independent Belarusian media have remained at its 1996 baseline grade of 0. Most Belarusian media outlets have virtually no experience in budgeting, marketing, advertising sales, staff relations, or general management. They generally suffer from a Soviet "top-down" approach that squelches creativity among staff members and perpetuates old habits and practices. A serious holdover from Soviet times is the reliance of almost all print outlets on a distribution network that is controlled by the state. As in many Eastern European countries, the postal service has a monopoly over newspaper delivery and can hamper the development of the independent press by denying it vital information about subscriptions and by taking 30 percent or more of the subscription price for delivery. Although some independent papers are printed at state printing plants, most rely on one independent printing plant in Belarus or on foreign printing houses in Poland, Russia, or Lithuania.

Independent Belarusian broadcasters also face myriad factors that inhibit their chances of financial survival. While independent television companies struggle to comply with onerous regulations and laws, state television stations operate with relatively few such restrictions. The government stations are fully subsidized, but they sell ads at very low rates per minute and pull advertising prices down. Additionally, many independent television companies are held by conglomerates that have other businesses, such as cable broadcasting, antenna maintenance, and newspaper publishing. Although some of the conglomerates are willing to cover shortfalls in the stationís basic operation cost, they do not have sufficient funds to re-invest in the stationís equipment or business. Moreover, since foreign investment is scarce and bank loans are limited, independent television companies are severely hampered in their ability to grow and become stronger.

Belarusian media outlets know little about their audiences, because there is very little media market research being done in the country. Moreover, outlets have little, if any experience in using market research to improve the editorial quality of their publications and broadcasts or to develop effective advertising and marketing strategies.

2. Journalism standards are low and reporting quality for both print and broadcast is poor: grade 1

The standards of journalism in Belarusian independent media are relatively low and Belarus remains at its baseline grade of 1. Reporting tends to be opinionated, stories poorly researched, facts and quotes inadequately sourced, and production and design quality low. Niche reporting in areas such as economics and business tends to be weak, although on the print side *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta* (Belarusian Business Newspaper) does a creditable job of covering economic and business issues. Print and broadcast technical facilities, especially in the regions, are generally weak. Although the Minsk-based papers fare better, many regional papers have inadequate and outdated computer equipment and extremely limited access to the Internet, hampering their ability to get information about international events.

Broadcast media face additional problems. On the whole, staff at television and radio stations lack professional training in broadcast journalism skills, technical production techniques, and other specialized skills. Local authorities also interfere directly in the work of many stations, prohibiting them from criticizing local authorities or the president and occasionally telling them how and what to air on the news. In some cases, they demand to preview recorded news programs prior to broadcast. In spite of this, television companies are dedicated to serving their local communities through newscasts, programming and other initiatives.

3. Supporting institutions do not function in the professional interests of media: grade 1

Professional associations in Belarus are generally weak although there has been some improvement in this attribute from its 1997 grade of 0 to a grade of 1 now. Although the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) has been active in monitoring and analyzing media violations in the country, there are no associations that provide member services, such as training programs and professional development. Outside of TBN, there is no non-commercial association that brings together broadcast professionals to work toward common goals and address mutual concerns. However, under ProMedia I, IREX helped spur the creation of two associations whose goal, in part, was to solve common problems. For example, the Association of Belarusian Publishers and Chief Editors united six Minsk-based national newspapers, six regional newspapers, and BelaPAN, the only independent Belarusian news agency, to pursue three goals: buying newsprint in bulk and negotiating with printing houses, dealing with advertisers, and lobbying for press freedoms.

4. Legal and regulatory frameworks do not support free speech: grade 0

Belarus has remained at its baseline grade of 0 for this attribute. Although the Belarusian constitution guarantees freedom of speech for all citizens, in practice independent media that criticize the Lukashenko government are routinely harassed through tax inspections or outright evictions, made easier by the fact that most "legal" office space in Belarus is owned by the government itself. Broadcast stations face onerous and arbitrary licensing requirements, and the limited number of licensed non-government television stations in Belarus is evidence of this problem. The director of one station claims to have at least 17 licenses in his records. Thus, the licensing process is clearly a tool used by local authorities to harass stations and limit industry development.

In contrast, state media enjoy exclusive advantages over independent media; they receive financial subsidies, direct government advertising, and special access to information. In 1997 a government memo was leaked that specifically prohibited any government body from providing information to independent journalists. In late 1998, a government directive was issued that required all news media to obtain a license before publishing any governmental legal information.

5. Plurality of and access to media are not reflected in Belarusian society: grade 0

There has been little improvement in this area, and Belarus remains at its baseline grade of 0. On the whole, Belarusians

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do not have access to a wide variety of media. With the minimum wage set at $2.50 a month and an average workerís wage totaling only $30 a month, few Belarusians can purchase independent newspapers or magazines, which generally cost more than state-subsidized publications. Broadcast media also have small audiences, partly because they are located in smaller communities and partly because their broadcasting hours are limited. There is some business and economic reporting, but little of it reaches the average Belarusian. In short, media in Belarus need to be expanded, but whether this can happen depends to a large degree on the state of the Belarusian economy and its political climate.

GRADING KEY

High (grade 4): country conforms substantially or entirely to the ndicator **Medium-High** (grade (3): country conforms to most aspects of the indicator **Medium** (grade 2): country conforms to some of the indicator **Medium-Low** (grade 1): country minimally conforms to the indicator **Low** (grade 0): country does not conform to the indicator.

The Matter of Aesthetics

Nikolai Khalezin, a Charter '97 member, held an interview with the newspaper Svobodnye Novosti. The interview was entitled "The City Chauvinist." Here is the English version of the interview as posted on the Charter '97 Website on May 17, 2000.

CITY CHAUVINIST NIKOLAI KHALEZIN

Nikolai Khalezin - a painter and a journalist. Something that we saw on the last page of the already closed newspaper "Imya" was this man's work. Not so long ago Khalezin said that Belarusians are dwelling in a constant conflict within themselves. When this inner conflict gets resolved, we'll get things corrected. New people will come to power, whereas we will realize that Belarus is a birthplace of real stars. Everything will be just great. The nation will finally come to the realization that they live in a country which gave birth to Shagal [Chagal] and Malevich. It will be made known to the whole world that Belarus and Lukashenko isn't really the same, but also Jacqueline Kennedy, Gretsky, Zaborov, Scherbo and, of course, Khalezin...)

You know, Nikolai, you are saying it so nicely that I'd like to believe that things will turn out your way. But it seems to me that as soon as I finish my tea with you here and get outdoors this feeling of inevitable changes will disappear. Turn you TV set on and it'll be gone just like that.

You better don't switch it on at all then. The snag is, there does exist this aesthetic conflict, which still needs to be resolved.

But there also exist people who have no idea of what this conflict is all about.

As soon as they realize its essence and find the aesthetics they prefer -things will change in a twinkling of an eye. One doesn't need to shout it out from high pulpit - what we need is to wear different clothes, listen to a different type of music, watch different movies, visit exhibitions, and preach about what people call "culture." Then there'll be no more problems with Lukashenko or whosoever. It's just ridiculous to even mention his name.

All that you've just said reminds me of the kitchen chats between the intelligentsia minority. It's mere sophistry, don't you think so?

Remember what was the situation like some five years away from now? People were ready to be driven back to old stalls. At the same time years 1994 and 1995 are the years of Renaissance. If things kept developing in the right direction we'd be now living in a totally different cultural atmosphere. Then, the people saw how they could possibly live. But well-educated stratum of the society was in minority to the rest.

Why are you calling that system cultural? It was more consumer-like. This was the era of business tours, Warsaw flea markets, Turkish shops and Chinese feather coats.

Doesn't matter. That's where one starts to grow. That's the way East Europe followed. And, finally, that's where the nascent aesthetics may appear.

But instead, there appeared the first Belarus president. He ascended from the old mentality "My neighbor got his house burnt. Good news, though it doesn't matter to me much." His sensational victory at the elections was the result of his promise to imprison all the adversaries. Kebich also helped him a good deal, by taking off good movies from the TV program and showing himself instead. People will never forgive the guy like that. Add here Polish Chinese cheap stuff and you get your aesthetics.

Right you are, but at that point we could still develop in harmony. Most people were dwelling in the same cultural context as our grandfathers 70 years ago - they simply didn't have a chance to try something different. But we are growing up and the critical mass will be increasing, as well.

Your recent article about the kolkhoz aesthetics was also part of the mechanism contributing to the growth of the critical mass? I like the way you put the heroes and events into the theatrical frames. It was pretty much new experience to look at things from this unusual angle. The role, played by the president, his counterparts, novices beyond the curtain, who are dreaming of becoming prima donnas et cetera. You seem to be doing your best to intensify the augmentation of the critical mass.

I am a very creative personality and I have a lot of interest in both the theater and journalism. But I wouldn't like to shout about it now.

No matter what you'd like to do or not to do now, you've also created yourself an image. Your involvement in the popular stickers campaign will never disappear from memory.

Luka was encircled.. by the way, d'you know that one may freely use this word "Luka" in press? He said it himself on TV "Belarus in Europe without Luka." So from now on we're officially allowed to use it. I hope I got it right. So he surrounded himself with painters, who got very encouraged and produced numerous portraits. Gradually the image has been formed: knitted brows, serious face. Everything was supposed to inspire people with fear. But out of a blue moon there appear these "bloody" caricatures, some were made in western style. I mean the stickers "Stop Luka!", "Game over!" and "Stop AIDS!". This is what I call new aesthetics. As soon as a person starts laughing, the fear leaves him. Lukashenko tried to cultivate the fear through his portraits and he had certain success. Then, there came out these pictures. I was among their makers. We attempted to shatter the myth about the indestructibility of the regime and explain that there's absolutely no need to panic from fear.

Whose idea was it to set up "Imya" newspaper?

Martsev gave me a call, I invited my spouse and a bunch of other people. We got ourselves locked up in the office for a fortnight and discussed our vision of the paper's image. We thoroughly worked out all the details: photos of journalists on the pages (so that people could feel that the editorial board were one family), methods of presenting the information and collages.

Beyond doubt you were the inspirer?

Everyone bore responsibility for his own job. I was sort of a

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generator of ideas. People were terrified at seeing the collages, but then started thinking "and why not?" If they can do it, why can't we? Now there appeared papers like "Navinki," initiated by young people, whom nobody took serious at first. And it goes without saying that Lukashenko's pompous administration never thought that someone would fight it on the level of symbols and cryptograms. Who of you could imagine that the Swedish Social-democrats will name their project of rendering assistance to Belarus "Stop Luka"? They even borrowed from us the picture from the sticker. The authorities turned out to be completely unprepared to face the new reality, whereas people were gladly accepting the aesthetics. Usage of similar steps had a positive effect on the protests' attendance. Remember, last year we'd been dreaming of gathering 20 thousand strong dissent? Presently we are saying: oh, there were only 50 thousand people at the Shlyach. Feel the difference! Youth masses are extremely enjoying the creative work and one cannot do much about it. There are so many people painting now, you can't even imagine. They even learnt how to compose Japanese crosswords, so that there appeared "Stop Luka" at the end. So the process is underway and it is unstoppable.

Don't you think that many, yourself included, somehow underestimate Lukashenko? He is really talented in a way and has strong charisma.

I don't like charismatic persons. I believe we overestimated the guy. At a certain point one may even succeed with PR strategy, as was the case with Zhirinovsky. But this is definitely the wrong time to do so.

It did work in the past, though. But the rest, you are talking about, have always failed... Some projects are apparently rude, like a sticker with a condom. You think that one may create new aesthetics by drawing genitals with mustache? Can you teach people vulgarity and change them for the better at the same time?

If you put it this way, let me tell you that one may draw genitals in a non perverted manner, as well. Painters easily grasp the idea. They think in images and know how to present the essence of the phenomenon in a funny and non-vulgar way. It is a bit more difficult for journalists - a word has one basic sense and, no matter what you do with it, it remains unchanged. As for the genitals, one may draw them in all different ways.

Were you the author of the picture?

Even if I knew the name of the guy I would never tell you. As for the alleged effectiveness of Lukashenko's measures, let me argue it. None of his last steps worked.

You're studying the statistics each month and can't be blindfold to the fact that the president is supported by 42% of the population. And there's no agitation at the moment. You keep telling that the nation chose a villager, but don't you think that you and your aesthetic repulse people? Don't forget - our country is provincial for the most part. And at least half of the Minsk residents come from villages. This is the stratum the president's working with. He speaks to them in the language they all understand, preaches his own "aesthetics." And it has certain effect, whether you like it or not. For the people feel as if they were from the same collective farm with their leader.

Let me tell you one unpopular thing - I do not care about such category, which you identify as "the people." Let me call myself, as a joke, a city chauvinist. We've been destroying this difference between the city and the province for too long a period, we went too far with it. Once we were sitting in a car together with Igor Dobrolubov. He asked me then: "Kolya, do you know which is the most fearful Belarusian TV program? "Welcome to the village party!", for it lifts the provincial aesthetics up to the national level." Lukashenko speaks one language with the crowd and the crowd supports him. But we're not talking about voting now. Stalin used to say: It doesn't matter who votes, it only matters who's counts. So, what difference does the notion "people" make? The situation is always in control of those who keep hold of the TV. At the moment it's him, but the young generation is growing up. And it wants MTV, Levi's and Pepsi. One cannot bring it back into the old context. It needs new aesthetics and culture.

You're talking about styles and tastes but both are developed here. We are native Minsk residents and we can understand those young people who like jeans. But the same people go and write vulgar graffiti on the fences.

Now they are writing "Long Live Belarus!" and "Lukashenko get away!" instead. When was the last time you saw something rude? Was it in the elevator? In our elevator you can only see new stickers, glued against the wall.

It's your job, isn't it?

Not mine. You cannot imagine how many adults are enjoying this. Some acquaintances of mine, you know, 50-60-year old gentlemen, love gluing the stickers.

But is it that important? Look what word you picked "aesthetics." It is so pretentious and comprises elements, which have nothing to do with our today's topic. Aesthetics is being formed by men. But the new-wave politicians have nothing to boast about in this respect. One thing they really did was that alternative presidential elections farce. Who wrote the scenario, who staged it, who chose candidates to play the main heroes? How could these people bring in any new aesthetics?

Viktor Gonchar was a script writer?

How about the main characters? Let's take Sharetsky, for example, where had he been July 21?

That very day he fled abroad.

You see, that's exactly what I'm talking about.

Didn't I say that the time of these politicians has passed? I don't want to blame Gonchar or Sharetsky, it wouldn't be right of me. The latter may say: "You, guys, are broad-shouldered, so go and fight. I am an old person." Last fall there happened the change of generations - the first mass demonstration of the new-wave politicians, the Freedom March October 17. That's where the new aesthetics was born.

Oh, boy, you are again saying some general stuff. Where else was it manifested, I only noticed the sticker campaign?

First and foremost, the opposition forces united under one white-red-white flag. This had been witnessed by world's leading political structures. Secondly, there emerged new PR, new visual products, and, of course, new leaders ascended.

Did they work out a special concept?

Judging by the result - yes, they did.

Why haven't you then got one leader?

You've got to realize that as soon as we announce his name, they will deal with him right away. Remember what had happened to Zakharenko, Gonchar and Karpenko? I don't envy the person, whom opposition will choose as its leader.

Political leaders will get people to the streets and shout: "Shame!" But we don't know who they are, what policy they are promoting. But the participants of the new politics are also a key element. What's their aesthetics all about?

Me, I know three major leaders: Lebedko, Statkevich and Vyachorka. Each of them is good enough, at least if you compare them to Lukashenko. Don't you think so?

Who knows... Let's go downstairs and ask that lady sitting over there. Things which are taking place also relate to her. At the same time she's got no clue about who Lebedko

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is and whether he's able to give her the aesthetics she thirsts for.

Have you heard Lebedko's speech in the US Congress or before the OSCE officials? When congressmen are saying that they bow their heads before him, when, after his appearance on Russian TV, his phone is ringing nonstop, when drivers stop their cars to shake his hand, does it tell you anything or not? When real elections, rather than farce, take place, the proper information will be in no time delivered to the voters. At that point you'll finally feel all the effect of the new aesthetics.

You mean stickers and flags? But it's just "playbills," "scenery" and "theatrical properties," if we use your terminology. However, the whole thing presupposes participation of heroes who don't have this subtle understanding of the aesthetics, Belarusians deserve.

Belarusians have to choose their man from the list of candidates we have at the moment. Otherwise, there may emerge someone from Russian circles. Then things will follow a different scenario: Russia will invest lots of money, go forth with its black PR, put people on psychological dope, as had been done by Dorenko. The worst thing that may now happen to our country is people's turning into mindless zombies. At the moment we look quite attractive in the overall context. Opposition never shoots, but instead is persuading the paramilitary groups, speaks of aesthetics and hopes for legitimate elections without Lukashenko.

What will happen to him then?

He'll get appointed a governor of Kursk region of Russia.

Are you serious? Does he know of these plans of his?

Have you read Yermoshin's letter to the US?

The one, in which he begged them not to introduce sanctions?

Exactly. That's what I call "you've had it, man." So, you see, there'll be only one choice left -Kursk region. Yermoshin wept: don't punish us we will not do it again, we are good. And he faced resolution. They don't care about his tears, nor do I. Let us return to the nation. Do you agree with me that Belarus is a country of starts?

It seems like you thought I would disagree - and I disagree. So what?

The first session of the Communist party was held here. The agreement, which split the USSR into pieces was also signed here. The country gave birth to many revolutionaries in art: Malevich, Shagal [Chagal] and Kandinsky. From here come Gromyko, Dostoevsky, Glinka, Oginski and Mitskevich. L. H. Oswald, who lived in Minsk, killed the husband of Jacqueline Radzivill - Belarusian duchess. I may proceed with the list, if you don't mind: Gretsky's mother comes from Minsk. Zaborov, Scherbo, Korbut, Semenov Tyan-Shansky, Przhevalsky, Dameika - Chili national hero. Dozens of such names. But today we aren't saying they are Belarusians, though we really should. All nations extol their heroes and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that attitude. Nations have to create their own myths and each has to live, realizing that he is part of a tribe and a man of the Earth. Then, wherever one goes, he will always say: I am Belarusian. As for now, many feel ashamed to tell people they are from Belarus.

Is it also part of thc national idea, which you're generating?

No, it is the aesthetics. And we really got to feel it and adopt.

BELARUSIANS ABROAD

Leaders of Belarusian-American Community Meet with U.S. Government Officials

As part of their continued campaign to increase awareness of the repression being faced in Belarus today, leaders of the Belarusan-American community met with U.S. government officials in Washington, D.C. on May 31, 2000. Meetings took place at the National Security Council, the State Department and on Capitol Hill. Representing the North-American based Coalition in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus (as well as some of its constituent organizations), the delegation followed in the wake of last week's visit by four opposition leaders from Belarus.

In the morning, the delegates attended a meeting at the National Security Council in the Old Executive Office Building. They met with NSC directors Mark Brzezinski and John Tedstrom, as well as with State Department officials Gene Fishel and John Armstrong. The Coalition representatives stressed the importance of U.S. support for democratic opposition forces in Belarus. They urged the Administration to include on its agenda for the upcoming Clinton-Putin summit, the issues of Belarusan independence and sovereignty. The position of the Coalition was duly noted, especially in regard to summit discussions. Moreover, attention was brought to the public statements that the U.S. government has recently issued in support of the rights of the Belarusan opposition to be heard without reprisals.

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Next on the Coalition's agenda was a visit to the State Department. In addition to a lengthy session with Ambassador Daniel Fried, Principal Deputy to the Ambassador-At-Large and Special Adviser to the Secretary for the New Independent States, the Coalition leaders met briefly with Harold Koh, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Ambassador Fried outlined the position of the U.S. government with respect to various issues pertaining to Belarus. He emphasized the official U.S. commitment to the four non-negotiable conditions set by the OSCE for observation for the upcoming parliamentary elections in Belarus. The Belarusan-American delegation stressed the critical timing of U.S. and European support for democracy and open media access in Belarus. Assistant Secretary Koh reiterated his strong concern over the Lukashenka regime's increasingly deplorable human rights record.

The delegation concluded its visit with a meeting on Capitol Hill, at the offices of the Congressional Helsinki Commission. An in-depth discussion with staff advisor Orest Deychakiwsky allowed the Coalition members to express their thanks and encouragement for the efforts of the U.S. Congress in condemning human rights violations in Belarus and in supporting the democratic opposition. Special note was made of the Helsinki Commission hearings chaired by Rep. Chris Smith, the Belarus roundtable sponsored by Rep. Sam Gejdenson, and Resolution 304, the latter of which caused a vocal outcry from Minsk and Moscow. The Coalition also praised the warm reception that last week's four-member Belarusan opposition delegation experienced on Capitol Hill from Senators Helms, McCain and Durbin, as well as Rep. Gilman and others. Again, the Coalition urged that these types of efforts continue and increase because they lend much needed support for the fight for freedom in Belarus. (Coalition in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus, Press Release, June 1, 2000)

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NEWS BRIEFS

Chronicle of Events

April 26

OPPOSITION HOLDS ČARNOBYLSKI ŠLACH IN MINSK

The Čarnobylski Šlach 2000 rocked Minsk on April 26 when about 40,000 people gathered at Jakub Kolas Square to mark the 14th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Charter '97 reported. It became the most massive opposition protest in recent years. Grim-faced marchers, many dressed in black, carried banned white-red-white Belarusian national flags, banners and icons and tolled a mourning bell. Most were young but there were some World War II veterans marching. Two banners "We are the people!" and "We shall overcome!" were stretched across the square. About a hundred youths wearing Belarusian national dresses, headed by Hienadź Hrušavy, president of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation, carried banners with the names of the regions they came from and the degree of radioactive contamination there. Activists of the Moscow Antifascist Alliance, who traditionally take part in the rally, carried a huge placard, which stated "Your regime is doomed!" In the middle of the procession, the marchers carried a huge 5x3 meter flag of the European Union. International observers, many prominent opposition leaders, and relatives of Belarusian political prisoners marched together with the crowd. People kept shouting "Long Live Belarus!", "Independence!" and similar slogans. Two TV groups, five newspaper correspondents and two senators from Czech Republic— Michael Zantovsky and Jan Ruml — were present, as well as Mr. Tomaš Pojar, the president of the Czech TV foundation "People in Need."

The two Czech legislators made short speeches in support of the demonstration. Mr. Zantovsky, the former Czech envoy to Washington, declared: " We support you in your struggle for independence, democracy and freedom ! " His words aroused tumultuous applause and shouts "Freedom, freedom...". Senator Ruml, a former Czech dissident, was draped in the historic white-red-white flag of Belarus. (Charter 97, Viasna, Belapan, April 26; United Press International, April 26; *Lidove Noviny* - Prague, April 27

May 3

U.S. HOUSE RESOLUTION CONDEMNS BELARUS HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

By a 409-2 vote, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution (H. Con. Res. 304), in which it condemned the continued egregious violations of human rights in Belarus, the lack of progress toward the establishment of democracy and the rule of law in the country, called on the Belarusian government to engage in negotiations with the opposition and to restore the constitutional rights of the Belarusian people, and called on Russia to respect the sovereignty of Belarus. (See FEATURES in the current issue of BR)

May 12

CZECH SENATORS CONDEMN ŁUKAŠENKA REGIME

On May 12, members of the Committee for International Relations, Defense and Security of the Czech Senate unanimously supported a draft resolution criticizing violations of human rights in Belarus, the *Naša Svaboda* independent newspaper reported. The draft resolution, which was sponsored by the Committee chairman Michael Zantovsky and Senator Jan Ruml, who visited Belarus recently and took part in the opposition-staged Čarnobylski Šlach 2000 in Minsk on April 26, will be submitted to the Czech Senate for approval. The senators condemned in the strongest terms the persecution of the Łukašenka regime's opponents. They



Scn. Žantovský (Czech Republic)

expressed deep concern at the disappearance of political opponents in the country, and said that the exercise of freedom of expression, assembly and association is severely restricted and that neither the independence of the judiciary nor of the legal profession is guaranteed. The authors of the resolution stressed that the Belarusian government institutions' legitimacy can only be restored through political dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. They also called on the Czech government to place pressure on the Belarusian government to honor its pledge to hold free and fair parliamentary elections by the end of this year and presidential elections in 2001. (*Naša Svaboda*, May 16, CTK, May 15)

June 26

U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE MEETS BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONISTS

Madeleine Albright met with Belarusian opposition activists at the "Toward a Community of Democracies" conference in Warsaw on 26 June. Belarus's official delegation--like those from China, Cuba, Iran, and Iraq--has not been invited to the conference, which foreign ministers and other officials from 108 countries are attending. Albright's meeting with Anatol Lyabedzka of the United Civic Party, Vintsuk Vyachorka of the Belarusian Popular Front, and several other Belarusian oppositionists followed a letter from two U.S. senators who had urged her to express U.S. support for the Belarusian opposition's efforts to overcome the country's "vestiges of communism and authoritarianism," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. "The meeting confirms that...the U.S. is really concerned about the situation in Belarus. We have been assured of official Washington's political and moral support for the Belarusian democratic opposition," Lyabedzka told RFE/RL. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 27)



"We are the People"
Čarnobylski Šlach 2000

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POLITICS

LUKASHENKA PLEDGES SUPPORT TO CURRENT DEPUTIES IN 2000 ELECTIONS — Lukashenka said parliamentary elections in 2000 are the main political task of the year. He pledged state support during those elections to the current deputies of the Chamber of Representatives, whom he handpicked in 1996 from among the ranks of the dissolved Supreme Soviet. He added that those deputies need no money for their re-election campaign. "We will provide you with full access to the people," he said, promising "to put in full operation the forces of our vertical public information [service]." He added that "we can win without any falsification." Lukashenka also said he sees the need to switch from "the futile wrangling with the so-called opposition" to supporting an ever increasing number of "constructive organizations" in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12)

...VOWS TO CREATE 300,000-STRONG FORCE WITH RUSSIA — Lukashenka said the development of "union relations" with Russia remains the top priority of Belarus's foreign policy. He added that both states should maintain their sovereignty and remain "international juridical subjects." In his opinion, NATO's recent expansion to Belarus's border, escalating regional conflicts, and international terrorism require the development of a Russian-Belarusian defense system. "We are creating a very powerful joint force on the border of Belarus and Russia, which will have the Belarusian army at its core. [The force] will have some 300,000 troops, equipped with the newest arms of the latest generation," Lukashenka told the legislature. He added that he will discuss this issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Minsk later this week. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12)

EUROPE POSTPONES DECISION ON OBSERVERS IN BELARUSIAN ELECTIONS — Hans Georg Wieck, head of the OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Minsk, told Belarusian opposition parties on 12 April that a decision on whether the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and other European organizations will send observers to Belarus's parliamentary elections will not be taken until September, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. He said the decision will depend on the Belarusian authorities' willingness to discuss amendments to the electoral code with the opposition, to allow the opposition access to the state media, and to change the powers and functions of the lower house, the Chamber of Representatives. Wieck expressed the joint stance of 10 European organizations that gathered in Vienna earlier this week to discuss Belarus's elections and sending observers to them. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 13)

OPPOSITIONISTS WARN ABOUT 'OCCUPATION' OF BELARUS — Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, has said the plan to create a 300,000-strong Russian-Belarusian military force (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 12 April 2000) is an attempt to restore the "Russian empire," Belapan reported on 13 April. "If this crazy plan of bringing Russian troops into Belarus is implemented, the pro-independence forces will regard this step as an occupation with all [its] consequences," Vyachorka added. Supreme Soviet Chairman Syamyon Sharetski, currently in exile in Lithuania, has also said the plan amounts to an "occupation." "Belarus is already practically governed by an occupation administration, the top posts of which are taken by people from Russia," BNS quoted Sharetski as saying. The creation of a Russian-Belarusian military force was announced by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 11 April and confirmed by Moscow Military District Commander Igor Puzanov the following day. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 14

LUKASHENKA NAMES NEW INTERIOR MINISTER — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka named Mikhail Udovikau as his interior minister on 22 April after releasing Yuriy Sivakau "for reasons of health" the day before, DPA reported. Sivakau had recently fallen out of favor for his use of force against demonstrators, journalists, and OSCE observers during a demonstration on 25 March. Meanwhile, the Belarusian opposition announced plans to go ahead with a rally on 26 April despite not having received official permission to do so. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 25)

NO JOINT RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN COMMAND PLANNED. Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin on 21 April said that Moscow will assist Belarus as needed but that he did not favor the creation of a joint Russian-Belarusian armed force, ITAR-TASS reported. "The Belarusian armed forces will only be under the control of their Ministry of Defense," Putin said, "and the Russian forces under the command of their leadership." (RFE/RL Newsline, April 25)

BELARUS HAPPY WITH RESULTS OF FIRST UNION COUNCIL OF MINISTER MEETING — Belarusian Prime Minister Vladimir Yermoshin told ITAR-TASS on 25 April that the first meeting of the council of ministers of the Union of Belarus and Russia, which took place in Moscow on 25 April, reflects the progress Minsk and Moscow have already made in bringing their two peoples back together. The meeting discussed the creation of a common currency and the formation of a legal basis for the further unification of the two republics. The German press agency dpa reported that the joint council of ministers has a 2000 budget of 2.2 billion rubles (approximately $77 million). One of the places the two sides may increase funding is support for victims of the 1986 Chornobyl explosion, ITAR-TASS reported. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 26)

BELARUS' ELECTORAL CODE TO BE AMENDED? — A 3 May session of the officially sponsored "sociopolitical dialogue" decided to submit amendments to the electoral code to the Chamber of Representatives, Belapan reported. Participants in the dialogue proposed including representatives of public associations and political parties in electoral commissions, abolishing the practice of early voting, and allowing public associations to field candidates. Before being debated in the legislature, the amendments must be assessed by experts in both the presidential administration and the lower chamber. None of Belarus's opposition parties, with the exception of the Party of Communists of Belarus, is participating in the "sociopolitical dialogue," which those parties argue is only a simulation of political dialogue. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 4)

OSCE STILL HOPES TO ORGANIZE DIALOGUE IN BELARUS — An OSCE troika of Foreign Ministry officials from Austria, Norway, and Romania arrived in Minsk on 4 May to try to organize a roundtable meeting with representatives of the government and the opposition, Belapan reported. "The Minsk visit underscores the continued concern of the OSCE about the slow process in the development of democratic institutions in Belarus," the organization said in a statement the same day. Meanwhile, Uladzimir Rusakevich, first deputy chief of the presidential staff, has proposed meeting with the Consultative Council of Belarusian opposition parties. Rusakevich is in charge of the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue" that is being conducted without the participation of the opposition. According to an RFE/RL Minsk correspondent, the opposition parties see Rusakevich's proposal as a propaganda move timed to coincide with the OSCE troika's visit, but they nevertheless agreed to meet with him after the troika leaves Minsk. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 5)

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OSCE WARNS MINSK AGAINST FAILING TO HOLD FAIR ELECTIONS — Walter Siegl, political director of Austria's Foreign Ministry, who visited Minsk last week along with the OSCE troika (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 5 May 2000), told journalists on 5 May that this fall's parliamentary elections in Belarus may not be internationally recognized if the government fails to make "substantial improvements" in its electoral legislation and human rights record. According to Siegl, the OSCE will send observers only if the government includes the opposition in the Central Electoral Commission and gives oppositionists fair access to the state media. "If certain of these proposals are not implemented, then there will be no observation on the part of the international community of the election in the fall," Reuters quoted Siegl as saying. The OSCE is to make a decision in August on whether to send observers to Belarus's election. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 9)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT TO ENTER 'SOCIOPOLITICAL DIALOGUE.' — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 15 May met with Lidziya Yarmoshyna, chairwoman of the Central Electoral Commission, to discuss this fall's parliamentary elections, Belarusian Television reported. Yarmoshyna said Lukashenka expressed his intention to meet with participants in the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue," most likely by the end of this month. According to Yarmoshyna, the meeting might result in proposing amendments to Belarus's electoral code. The Belarusian opposition is not participating in the "sociopolitical dialogue." The same day Yury Khadyka of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front met with Lukashenka's representative in a bid to open talks between the Consultative Council of opposition parties and the authorities on the upcoming elections. Such talks are being urged by the OSCE, which has threatened not to recognize the elections if the regime fails to reach an understanding with the opposition (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 9 May 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, May 16

BELARUS' LEGISLATURE CONDEMNS U.S. CONGRESS RESOLUTION — The Chamber of Representatives on 17 May condemned the U.S. House of Representatives' resolution on Belarus (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 9 May 2000), Belapan reported. The Belarusian lawmakers accused the U.S. Congress of "deliberate" unwillingness to seek "true information" about the situation in Belarus from the Belarusian legislature or the Belarusian embassy in Washington. They also expressed their regret that the U.S. supports the "destructive" Belarusian opposition, which, they argued, "under the pretext of democratic transformation is pursuing a policy oriented toward destabilizing the internal situation" in the country. The Belarusian lawmakers also demanded that the U.S. administration cease exercising "political, economic, and moral pressure" on Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 17)

LUKASHENKA SEES BELARUS-RUSSIA MILITARY GROUP AS MOBILIZATION FORCE — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 17 May said the West misunderstood his earlier statements on the creation of a joint Belarusian-Russian military force on Belarus's western border. He said the 300,000-strong group that he proposed will be a mobilization force to act in defense during a conflict and will not be a permanent army. "They [in the West] have made this into a problem [claiming] that we want to increase our armed forces. We simply do not have enough resources to arm 300,000 troops today," Belarusian Television quoted him as saying. Then Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin said last month that he did not favor the creation of a joint Russian-Belarusian armed force (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 25 April 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, May 18)

BELARUS' TRADE UNIONS CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS ON REGIME — The Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions has called on Western countries and organizations to impose political and economic sanctions on the Lukashenka regime, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 17 May. In particular, the trade unions appealed to the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress, and the International Labor Organization to impose sanctions and use other forms of pressure on the regime in order to make it observe international law, human rights, and the country's constitution. According to congress head Viktar Babayed, the authorities last fall launched a campaign of persecution against independent trade unions in Belarus, forcing their closure at many plants. Uladzimir Makarchuk, another trade union leader, said the authorities intend to eliminate Belarus's independent worker movement before this year's parliamentary elections. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 18)

LUKASHENKA ADRESSES UNION PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY... — Addressing a session of the Belarus-Russia Union Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk on 18 May, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said that in the event of an emergency, Belarus and Russia can mobilize an "even larger" force than the 300,000-strong military group he had mentioned earlier, Belapan reported. Lukashenka noted that the U.S. Congress resolution on Belarus of 3 May (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 9 May 2000) provides "a biased account of political processes in Belarus and is based from beginning to end on inventions, provocative judgments, and conclusions of the same sort." He said the problem of human rights violations in Belarus is "far-fetched and overblown beyond reason in the West." Lukashenka also stressed that this fall's parliamentary election in Belarus will be held on a "first-past-the-post" basis. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 19)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION TO ENTER DIALOGUE WITH GOVERNMENT? — Presidential Staff Deputy Chief Uladzimir Rusakevich, coordinator of the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue" in Belarus on behalf of the government, told Belarusian Television on 20 May that representatives of the government and the Consultative Council of opposition parties will meet on 22 May in the presence of an OSCE Minsk mission official. According to Rusakevich, the sides are to discuss the possible "participation of opposition parties in the sociopolitical dialogue." Rusakevich added that the expected meeting between Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and participants in the "sociopolitical dialogue" will speed up the opposition's decision to join this forum. The opposition has so far declined to participate in the "sociopolitical dialogue," calling it a pale imitation of the political negotiations that both the opposition and the OSCE believe to be necessary to overcome the country's constitutional crisis. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 22)

SIGNATORIES TO CIS COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY TO BOOST COOPERATION — The presidents of the countries still participating in the 1992 CIS Collective Security Treaty--Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan--agreed in Minsk on 24 May to step up cooperation in response to what they see as the growing threats of international terrorism and extremism. The summit adopted nine documents, but no details have been made known. "A mechanism has been worked out to make this treaty a viable instrument capable of responding to the changing world not only today but also in the future," Belarusian Television quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying. A joint statement said the adopted documents open the "possibility to use force and collective security means." Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Ivanov said the parties to the treaty will be able to purchase Russian weapons at prices below market level, according to AP. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 25)

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NO PROGRESS IN BELARUS'S POLITICAL DIALOGUE — The forum for the government-inspired "sociopolitical dialogue" that was planned for 24 May has been rescheduled for early June, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 24 May. The opposition, which is not participating in the "sociopolitical dialogue," is in contact with the authorities through its experts and the OSCE Minsk mission, but no decision on the opening of talks on the upcoming parliamentary elections has been taken. Meanwhile, the Conservative Christian Party, which represents one wing of the split Belarusian Popular Front, says it is terminating its participation in preparations for political talks with the regime. The party noted that the year-long preparation process has brought no result to date, while the regime has strengthened its control over the media and continues to violate human rights in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 25)

MINSK 'UPSET' BY U.S. SENATOR'S INTENT TO SUPPORT OPPOSITION — Belarus's Foreign Ministry said on 27 May that it is "upset" by Senator Jesse Helms's pledge to sponsor legislation to provide direct U.S. financial support to democratic forces and civil society in Belarus, Belapan reported. Helms, who chairs the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, promised such a move at a 24 May meeting in Washington with a Belarusian opposition delegation. The delegation consisted of Vintsuk Vyachorka, head of the Belarusian Popular Front; Anatol Lyabedzka, head of the United Civic Party; Pavel Zhuk, chief editor of "Nasha Svaboda," an independent newspaper; and Zmitser Bandarenka, a leader of the Charter-97 human rights group. The ministry warned the U.S. that the pledged support constitutes interference in Belarus's internal affairs. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 29)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT CALLS ON OPPOSITION TO TAKE PART IN ELECTIONS... — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 30 May met with participants in the government-promoted "sociopolitical dialogue," which the Belarusian opposition has boycotted. Lukashenka urged what he called "the extreme opposition" to take part in parliamentary elections this fall, pledging to create equal conditions for all candidates in the ballot. He also promised to comply with the OSCE Minsk mission's proposal to create an atmosphere of trust in the country during the election campaign. "The authorities oblige themselves from this day on not to take actions that would worsen conditions for the activity of all public organizations, parties, and groups, including the opposition political parties," Belapan quoted Lukashenka as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 31)

...THREATENS TO PUNISH OPPOSITION FOR SEEKING SUPPORT IN WEST... — At the same time, Lukashenka accused "the radical opposition" of seeking money "overseas" in order to "overthrow the existing 'illegitimate authority'" in Belarus, Belapan reported. Lukashenka was apparently alluding to a recent visit of Belarusian oppositionists to Washington, where they were promised financial support (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 29 May 2000). Lukashenka said he will refer the matter to Belarus's Security Council. "One should not look at similar things indifferently, and the people who are responsible for peace and tranquility in our state should not overlook this, either," he noted. "Any retribution against these individuals because of their meetings in Washington would be a serious mistake and in the lead-up to elections later this year would further set back efforts to restore the legitimate democratic process in Belarus," U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said the same day. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 31)

...PLEDGES TO AMEND ELECTORAL CODE — Lukashenka also pledged that a bill of amendments to the Electoral Code will be submitted to the Chamber of Representatives for approval in the coming days. He did not specify which provisions of the code are to be amended, adding only that the changes may affect the procedure for establishing electoral commissions and the status of international and domestic observers. The OSCE and the Belarusian opposition are urging amendments to the Electoral Code to ensure the democratization of the election process in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 31)

BNF LEADER SAYS OPPOSITION FOUND SUPPORT IN WASHINGTON — Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 30 May that the Belarusian opposition has found support in Washington. Last week Vyachorka visited the U.S. capital as part of a Belarusian opposition delegation (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 29 May 2000) and met with U.S. congressmen and politicians. "We have found understanding in such a key issue as support for Belarus's independence. I hope very much that [U.S. President Bill] Clinton will raise this issue in his contacts with Russia's new leadership," Vyachorka said. He confirmed that the Belarusian opposition will take part in parliamentary elections only if the authorities expand the powers of the current legislature, democratize the election law, allow the opposition regular access to the state media, and halt political persecution. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 1)

MINSK SAYS TASHKENT MISUNDERSTOOD LUKASHENKA OVER CIS SECURITY... — Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikalay Barysevich on 1 June said Uzbekistan's response to Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's statement at the 24 May CIS Collective Security Council summit in Minsk is "unjustifiably harsh and incorrect," Interfax reported. Barysevich added that Tashkent "considerably distorted the real sense" of what Lukashenka said. Lukashenka had commented at the summit that Uzbekistan "would like to get [CIS and Russian military] support without joining [the CIS Collective Security] Treaty." "If you want support, join the treaty," Lukashenka added. Earlier this week the Uzbek Foreign Ministry said Lukashenka's words were "ill-considered and crude." (RFE/RL Newsline, June 2)

...ADVISES VILNIUS NOT TO BE 'NERVOUS' ABOUT CABINET APPOINTMENT — Barysevich also said Vilnius does not need "to react so nervously" to last month's appointment of Vladimir Uskhopchik as Belarus's deputy defense minister, Belapan reported. Uskhopchik headed the Vilnius-based division of Soviet troops that stormed the city's television tower in January 1991, killing 14 unarmed civilians. The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry warned that Uskhopchik's appointment could damage relations between the two countries. Barysevich said Lithuania should avoid blaming Minsk for appointing Uskhopchik, just as Minsk avoids blaming Vilnius for giving shelter to Supreme Soviet Chairman Syamyon Sharetski, who, Barysevich argued, "is trying to organize alternative power bodies to those in Belarus." (RFE/RL Newsline, June 2)

BELARUSIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATS HOLD CONGRESS — At its congress in Minsk on 3-4 June, the opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Popular Hramada, BSDP) re-elected Mikalay Statkevich as leader of the party, Belapan reported. The forum also reaffirmed that the party will participate in this fall's parliamentary election only if the authorities give the opposition access to the state media, expand the powers of the current legislature, and include opposition representatives in electoral commissions at all levels. The delegates gave the BSDP Central Committee the right to convene "a second session of the congress" in July in order to make a final decision on the party's participation in the parliamentary ballot. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 5)

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EXILED OPPOSITION LEADER CALLS ON BELARUSIANS TO OPPOSE UNION WITH RUSSIA — The Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front has disseminated an appeal by its exiled leader, Zyanon Paznyak, to oppose the Belarusian-Russian union state, Belapan reported on 2 June. Paznyak calls on Belarusians to sign a letter stating that the Belarusian-Russia union treaty is illegitimate. He urges Belarusians not to participate in any elections organized by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime and pledges that free parliamentary elections in Belarus will be held by the Belarusian Popular Front and "organizations of the national liberation movement." Paznyak also casts doubt on the intentions of the OSCE Minsk mission, saying that its purpose is to create a "colonial" opposition in Belarus. "Is Belarus not just a bargaining chip in trading between Russia and Germany for Kaliningrad Oblast (Eastern Prussia) and oil and gas pipelines through Belarus?" Paznyak writes. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 5)

BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATS TO DECIDE NEXT MONTH ON ELECTION PARTICIPATION — The Coordination Council of Democratic Forces announced on 6 June that it will convene a congress of democratic forces in Minsk on 2 July in order to make a final decision on whether to participate in this fall's parliamentary elections, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The meeting was attended by leaders of the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), the Social Democratic Party (Popular Hramada) , and the Charter-97 human rights group. According to BNF leader Vintsuk Vyachorka, the congress's resolution on the elections in Belarus will impact on the decision by the OSCE and other European structures on whether to send international observers to those elections. "The Western democratic countries should respect the resolution adopted by [Belarus's] basic democratic forces," Vyachorka told RFE/RL. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 7)

BELARUS CRITICIZES U.S. AMBASSADOR NOMINEE — Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikalay Barysevich on 8 June said newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Belarus Michael Kozak made "incorrect statements" during his confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate. "Hasty assessments of the internal political situation in Belarus and unjustified comparisons with situations in other countries can hardly be a good point of departure," Belarusian Television quoted Barysevich as saying. Kozak, who served in Cuba before his nomination to become ambassador in Minsk, compared Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime to that of Fidel Castro. "Apart from the names of the victims, the descriptions of human rights violations in each country are often almost identical," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 9)

BELARUSIAN NGO LEADER REPROACHED FOR PARTICIPATING IN 'SOCIOPOLITICAL DIALOGUE.' — The Supervisory Council of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BKhK), a prominent human rights group in Belarus, has accused BKhK Chairwoman Tatsyana Protska of having discredited the organization and made "inexcusable mistakes," "Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta" reported on 13 June. The council is demanding that Protska be dismissed. Carlos Sherman, a member of the council, said Protska made a mistake by joining the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue" initiated by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Alyaksandr Patupa, another member of the council, told the newspaper that the BKhK should not participate in the "sociopolitical dialogue," since this forum intends to legitimize Lukashenka's regime through elections but without introducing a democracy. Protska has suspended her chairmanship pending a BKhK congress in September. "I am accused of furthering the inc(RFE/RL Newsline, June 13)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT 'NOT QUITE SATISFIED' WITH GOVERNMENT — Alyaksandr Lukashenka said on 15 June that he is "not quite satisfied" with the performance of Premier Uladzimir Yarmoshyn's cabinet, Belarusian Television reported. In Lukashenka's opinion, the government has begun to "introduce unpopular measures--all at once." He reproached the government for what he regards as too swift a pace for bridging the gap between the multiple exchange rates for the Belarusian ruble. According to Lukashenka, real wages in Belarus have recently fallen by 1.5 percent and lag behind prices. He instructed the government to ensure a rise in real wages by the fourth quarter of 2000. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 16)

MINSK OSCE MISSION SLAMS PRESIDENTIAL AIDE FOR 'DIPLOMATIC INCIDENT.' — The OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Minsk has accused presidential aide Syarhey Posakhau of provoking a "diplomatic incident" ahead of a visit by a European parliamentary troika, Belapan reported. The troika--consisting of representatives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, and the European Parliament--will be in Minsk from 19-22 June. Posakhau told Belarusian Television on 14 June that Hans Georg Wieck, the head of the OSCE Minsk mission, had refused to include in the troika's program meetings with representatives of all political parties in Belarus and participants in the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue." The OSCE mission said Posakhau's statement exerts pressure on the organizers of the visit "in a threatening manner" and contravenes international diplomatic practice. The mission added that the troika's participation in the "sociopolitical dialogue" was never discussed by Wieck and Posakhau. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 16)

AMENDMENTS TO BELARUS' ELECTORAL CODE REPORTED TO BE MINIMAL — Syarhey Kalyakin--leader of the opposition Belarusian Communist Party, which is taking part in the "sociopolitical dialogue"--said on 16 June that the dialogue's proposals to amend the country's electoral code have been accepted by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka only to a "minimum extent," Belapan reported. According to Kalyakin, Lukashenka rejected the amendment giving political parties and public organizations the right to fill up to 30 percent of the electoral commissions. Kalyakin also said Lukashenka did not approve the provisions that made electoral commissions' records available to election observers and imposed a stricter early voting procedure. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 19)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY TROIKA MINUS ONE ARRIVES IN MINSK — Adrian Severin from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Jan Wirsma from the European Parliament arrived in Minsk on 19 June to seek to initiate a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition in order to ensure democratic parliamentary elections this fall. OSCE Minsk mission head Hans Georg Wieck said that a representative of the third organization--the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly--could not visit Minsk owing to "technical reasons." According to Supreme Soviet deputy Uladzimir Nistsyuk, who is a member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the European parliamentary troika has not worked out a joint position on what is taking place in Belarus and on how Europe should react to Belarus's upcoming parliamentary elections. Belarusian commentators note that Severin and Wirsma are scheduled to meet the Russian ambassador to Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 20)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION PROPOSES POSTPONING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS — Adrian Severin of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Jan Wirsma of the European Parliament met with the Consultative Council of Belarusian

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opposition parties on 20 June, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Belarusian oppositionists told the European mediators that they are not afraid of this fall's elections but do not want to participate in an "electoral farce" that could legitimize the current "pseudo-parliament"--the Chamber of Representatives. Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, proposed that the ballot be postponed for six months in order to give the authorities time to improve the country's electoral legislation and political climate. Severin assured the opposition that the OSCE continues to insist that the Belarusian regime amend the electoral code, give the opposition access to the media, expand the powers of the legislature, and stop political persecution. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 21)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT REPORTEDLY REJECTS 'MOST IMPORTANT' ELECTORAL CODE CHANGES — Alena Skryhan of the opposition Belarusian Communist Party said that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has rejected the "most important" amendments to the electoral code proposed by the "sociopolitical dialogue," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 20 June. Of the original 17 proposed amendments, Lukashenka submitted only 10 to the Chamber of Representative for approval. According to Skryhan, Lukashenka rejected proposals on giving the opposition the right to fill up to 30 percent of the electoral commissions, lowering the valid election turnout to 25 percent, making authorized copies of electoral commissions' records available to election observers, and abolishing the practice of early voting. "The constructive forces of the sociopolitical dialogue...formulated their wishes in a loyal and fully acceptable form," Belarusian Television quoted Alyaksandr Kozyr of the Chamber of Representatives as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 21)

NO PROGRESS REPORTED IN RESOLVING BELARUS'S CONSTITUTIONAL STANDOFF — Adrian Severin of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Jan Wiersma of the European Parliament convened a roundtable of Belarusian opposition parties, NGOs, and administration representatives in Minsk on 21 June, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The sides, however, failed to achieve any progress in overcoming the constitutional impasse over the upcoming parliamentary elections (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 21 June 2000). The government side argued that the authorities have met the OSCE's requirements by initiating the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue" and accepting some amendments to the electoral code. The opposition maintained that both the "sociopolitical dialogue" and the amendments are pale imitations of a political consensus in Belarus. Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the opposition United Civic Party, said that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, is not willing to compromise with the opposition. "This meeting disappointed me," Lukashenka's aide Syarhey Posakhau commented. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 22)

OPPOSITION PARTY TO IGNORE CONGRESS OF BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES — Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, has announced his party will not participate in the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus, which is scheduled to take place in Minsk on 2 July, Belapan reported on 21 June. The congress is expected to decide whether Belarus's democratic forces will take part in this fall's parliamentary elections. Paznyak believes that the 2 July forum will divert the democratic opposition's attention from the All-Belarusian Congress for Independence, which is to convene on 29 July. According to Paznyak, each party should decide independently about its participation in the upcoming elections. The Conservative Christian Party has already decided to boycott this fall's ballot. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 22)

EUROPEAN MEDIATORS SAY BELARUS LACKS CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS — "The delegation, were it to give its final judgment at this moment, would not be able to recommend the institutions it represents to send international observers to the parliamentary election in Belarus," Jan Wiersma of the European Parliament told journalists in Minsk on 22 June. Wiersma visited Minsk with Adrian Severin of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to study the pre-electoral situation in Belarus. Wiersma said the amendments proposed to the electoral code do not substantially improve the transparency of the electoral process and do not guarantee that composition of the electoral commissions will be pluralistic. He added that limited progress has been made toward giving all political parties access to the media, while there has been virtually no movement toward ensuring that the parliament's function is meaningful. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 23)

WILL RUSSIA PRESS LUKASHENKA TO DEMOCRATIZE BELARUS? — Wiersma and Severin urged the Belarusian government "to make full use of the limited time still available and intensify the process of negotiations with the opposition," Belapan reported. Severin said he believes Russia might still persuade Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to change his authoritarian policies. "We expect Russia as an OSCE member to undertake an important role in strengthening the democratic process in Belarus. My mood is between hope and fear," Reuters quoted Severin as saying. The Belarusian opposition proposed postponing the parliamentary elections, but administration officials replied that such a move would violate the constitution promulgated in the 1996 referendum. "The country lives by expectations of parliamentary elections and the authorities will win them," Reuters quoted presidential administration deputy chief Ivan Pashkevich as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 23)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE AMENDS ELECTORAL CODE. — The Chamber of Representatives on 22 June voted unanimously to amend the electoral code, Belapan reported. Central Electoral Commission Chairwoman Lidziya Yarmoshyna presented the draft amendments to the legislature, saying that Lukashenka submitted nine of the 16 changes that were originally proposed within the framework of the so-called "sociopolitical dialogue." In particular, the passed amendments regulate the status and functions of domestic observers, facilitate the collection of signatures in candidates' support, allow political parties to have candidates in constituencies where they lack registered branches, and require that candidates present their income and property declarations. The Belarusian opposition argues that Lukashenka excluded the most substantial proposals to amend the electoral code, including the opposition's right to fill up to 30 percent of the electoral commissions and the abolition of early voting (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 21 June 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, June 23

BELARUS SAYS ELECTORAL CODE MEETS INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS — The Justice Ministry announced in a statement that the electoral code amended by the Chamber of Representatives on 22 June meets international standards, Belapan reported the next day. The ministry added that the code provides a sufficient legal basis for holding free and democratic elections. It noted that it was issuing that statement in connection with the recent visit to Minsk of European mediators and "with the heating up of the atmosphere by some politicians over the adoption of amendments to the electoral code." Representatives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament commented that the conditions for holding democratic elections do not exist in Belarus (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 23 June 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, June 26)

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BELARUS' FORMER PREMIER RECEIVES THREE-YEAR SUSPENDED PRISON TERM — The Minsk City Court on 19 May found former Premier Mikhail Chyhir guilty of abusing his authority in 1995 by giving a company a break on import duties. The court sentenced Chyhir to a three-year prison term suspended for two years. The court also ordered him to pay $220,000 in damages. Chyhir said he is innocent, adding that he will appeal the verdict. "The sentence is legally void, it's all lies and fabrication. This is a shame for the Belarusian state, not for me," AP quoted him as saying. Chyhir pledged to continue his opposition political activities and run for president in next year's election. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 19)

U.S. EMBASSY IN MINSK SAYS EX-PREMIER'S TRIAL POLITICALLY MOTIVATED — "The U.S. has said all along and continues to believe that the trial against [former Prime Minister Mikhail] Chyhir was politically motivated and the charges against him should have been dropped," according to a statement issued by the US Embassy on 19 May, Belapan reported. Chyhir was sentenced to a three-year suspended prison term and ordered to pay a $220,000 fine (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 19 May 2000). Chyhir was also deprived of the right to hold administrative positions for five years. The U.S. Embassy, noting Chyhir's intention to appeal the sentence, expressed the hope that "the government will use this opportunity to remove the remaining restrictions and penalties imposed on Mr. Chyhir." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 22)

OSCE SLAMS BELARUS FOR SENTENCE ON FORMER PREMIER — The OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Belarus has criticized the three-year suspended prison term imposed last week on former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 19 May 2000), Belapan reported on 22 May. The group said it had notified the Belarusian authorities of a number of violations of the law during Chyhir's pretrial investigation and trial. The group also noted that the sentence "neutralizes on purpose the political potential of the former prime minister at a crucial moment of the development of the country" and "puts into doubt the readiness of the government to create a situation of trust and peace in the interest of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections." The OSCE mission called on the authorities to revise the sentence and thus "contribute to the restoration of the credibility and independence of the judiciary in Belarus." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 23)

WHEREABOUTS OF DISAPPEARED BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONISTS UNKNOWN — Prosecutor General Aleh Bazhelka told journalists on 25 May that investigators have no information about the whereabouts of former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka, former Deputy Prime Minister Viktar Hanchar, and Anatol Krasouski, who disappeared in 1999, Belarusian Television reported. Bazhelka also said that official expertise has confirmed that it was former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikava who had called Belarus last year after her disappearance from house arrest (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 21 December 1999). He added that her whereabouts are also unknown. Bazhelka announced that it is not ruled out that the Prosecutor-General's Office will appeal the verdict on former Premier Mikhail Chyhir (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 19 May 2000), adding that investigators are now working on different "episodes of Chyhir's illegal activity" from those examined by court. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 26)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST FACES TWO-YEAR PRISON TERM — The prosecution in the trial of Mikalay Statkevich, leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, has demanded a two-year prison term for the defendant, Belapan reported on 31 May. Statkevich, along with Supreme Soviet deputy Valery Shchukin, was charged with the organization of and participation in the unauthorized "Freedom March" on 17 October 1999. The march ended in clashes between protesters and riot police as well as in numerous arrests (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 19 and 26 October 1999). A defector from the Interior Ministry later confessed that the clashes were deliberately provoked by the police (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 17 February 2000). Statkevich told the court that street protests have now become the only way for people in Belarus to express their views. "I think this struggle will continue, regardless of whether Statkevich is in prison or not," Belapan quoted him as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 1)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST FAILS IN BID TO HAVE ASSAILANTS PROSECUTED — A Minsk district prosecutor has refused to instigate criminal proceedings against four policemen who beat up Yuras Belenki, deputy chairman of the Christian Conservative Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 7 June. Belenki complained that he was harshly beaten during the 25 March rally (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 March 2000), was traumatized, and then spent three days in jail, where he was denied medical care. Belenki said more than 10 people witnessed his beating, but the prosecutor refused to interrogate them or view a police video on which the incident was filmed. "The prosecutor [refused to file suit] citing the reports of two riot policemen who wrote that they did not use any special means to arrest me but took me gently by the arm and led me away," Belenki noted. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 8)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER'S PHONE BUGGED — A telephone technician has discovered that the telephone line of Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party, has been bugged, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 8 June. "Something that we have long suspected and talked about has now been confirmed by material evidence," Lyabedzka commented. He added that he will ask the Prosecutor General's Office whether it authorized his telephone to be tapped. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 9)

LUKASHENKA TO PLACE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMS 'UNDER HIS CONTROL.' Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 14 June told heads of higher educational institutions that he will place this year's entrance examinations "under his control," Belarusian Television reported. "If some of you or those who are listening to us today think that the president should not deal with [entrance examinations], he is simply a narrow-minded man," Lukashenka said. A presidential aide explained that many officials in Belarusian higher educational institutions take bribes for enrolling students. Lukashenka has asked the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, an organization modeled on the Soviet-era Communist Youth League, to monitor entrance examinations in Belarus on his behalf. In 1995, in a bid to prevent examination topics being leaked, Lukashenka kept those topics in his presidential safe and read them out live on television and radio on examination day to those about to take the examinations. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 15)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONISTS SENTENCED FOR 'FREEDOM MARCH.' —The Minsk City Court on 19 June sentenced Social Democratic Party leader Mikalay Statkevich to a suspended two-year prison term and Supreme Soviet deputy Valery Shchukin to a suspended one-year prison sentence. The court said Statkevich and Shchukin were guilty of organizing the unauthorized "Freedom March" on 17 October 1999, which led to clashes between demonstrators and riot police. Statkevich and Shchukin are confined to Minsk for the period of their sentences and barred from running in

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elections, as was former Premier Mikhail Chyhir (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 19 May 2000). Statkevich commented that the court handed down suspended sentences instead of stiff prison terms because the authorities need foreign investment, according to Belapan. Statkevich added that it also wants to eliminate from the elections any possible rivals of the ruling regime. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 20)

HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE DENOUNCES THREATS AS FAILURE TO END POLITICAL CRISIS — In a statement released to Radio Free Europe responding to recent threats to Belarusian opposition leaders who had traveled to the U.S. at the League's opposition, Catherine Fitzpatrick, executive director of the International League for Human Rights said: "We are aware that since the League's guests returned to Belarus this week, there have been a series of bellicose and threatening statements by the Government of Belarus. There is nothing wrong with a country's opposition coming to the U.S. at the invitation of an international human rights organization. Far from a 'subversive' act, this is the normal international discourse of a democratic society and its counterparts abroad." The League had organized a series of meetings for the Belarusian visitors with community groups, research institutes, human rights NGOs, the press, the State Department, and members of Congress. "Unless they are an enemy of democracy and freedom, no one would see anything inherently 'treasonous' about an opposition speaking to our elected representatives about their grave human rights concerns and aspirations for democracy. Any attempt to view this as 'hostile' in the old Soviet manner is a restoration of the cold-war approach," remarked Fitzpatrick.

The League called for a greater investment in democracy in Belarus, "not punishing Belarus by letting it take the greatest hit in the cuts in our overall foreign aid budget." Added Fitzpatrick: "Our visitors are patriots who genuinely care about their country and its future, and the attempt to portray them as 'radicals' or 'traitors' is yet another troublesome indication of the absolute failure of good will on the part of the Belarusian government to engage in negotiations with the democratic opposition, under the conditions set by OSCE, to end the political crisis in Belarus," she concluded. (ILHR, May 31)

ECONOMY

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SAYS NO REFORM OF KOLKHOZ SYSTEM... — Alyaksandr Lukashenka told a conference of agricultural managers and leaders on 7 April that Belarus's collective farm system will "always" be a basis for agricultural production in the country. "In difficult moments nobody destroys or reforms things. Reforming means a lot of money, which we unfortunately do not have," Lukashenka said in a two-and-a-half hour speech broadcast on national radio. He admitted that 25 percent of Belarusian farms are "utterly worthless" but recommended that they be "affiliated" with enterprises that are doing better, rather than be reformed. According to Lukashenka, reform in the Belarusian agricultural sector is being urged by "those abroad" who want to "destroy our agriculture" and gain a market for their own products in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 10)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT REAFFIRMS ECONOMIC PRIORITIES... — In his annual address to the Belarusian legislature on 11 April, Alyaksandr Lukashenka said the country's national economy priorities are the same as four years ago: increase exports, construct housing, and develop the agricultural sector, Interfax and Belapan reported. Lukashenka noted that Belarus "is building a new, integrated system of sociopolitical and economic development, which is regarded as the Belarusian model." He admitted, however, that "the considerable foreign trade deficit, the shortage of hard currency, the intensive printing of money, and the multiplicity of currency exchange rates" provoked a "surge" in inflation last year (350 percent). (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12)

...WARNS WEST AGAINST PRESSURIZING BELARUS... — Lukashenka noted that the low level of foreign investment in the Belarusian economy results from the West's political pressure on Belarus and its calls on foreign companies to abstain from cooperation with Belarus. Western investors, he said, have all necessary conditions for developing business in Belarus, which, he added, has created more free economic zones than are even necessary. Lukashenka said his political course is supported by the people, and he warned the West against interfering in Belarus's affairs. "We cannot be intimidated by either blackmail or direct pressure, including from the so-called teachers of democracy. We know their policy of double standards," he said. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 12)

IN MINSK, PUTIN STRESSES ECONOMIC TIES IN UNION WITH BELARUS — Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Belarusian counterpart, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in Minsk on 16 April to discuss the implementation of the Russian-Belarusian Union treaty, Belapan and ITAR-TASS reported. Putin said before the meeting that economic ties should lie at the root of both countries' integration. Following the meeting, Putin told journalists that the talks concerned "the synchronization of our plans" in the political, economic, and military spheres. Putin added that "defense and political plans cannot be built on a shaky economic foundation." According to him, Russia and Belarus should primarily tackle problems related to the single tax policy and customs area, and joint tariff regulations. Lukashenka commented that "Vladimir Putin and I made a weighty contribution to the fulfillment of the union treaty in the military-technical, military, and economic aspects," but provided no details.(RFE/RL Newsline, April 17)

BELARUSIAN TRADE UNIONS URGE GOVERNMENT TO STOP POVERTY — Belarus's Federation of Trade Unions on 20 April adopted a resolution urging the government to stop the decline in living standards of the population, Belapan reported. "Even highly-skilled specialists are unable to support their families and themselves. Forty-seven percent of families in the country live below the official subsistence budget," the federation noted. The resolution demands that the government repay all wage arrears by mid-2000, bring the purchasing power of wages up to the 1990 level in four to five years, minimize the gap between wages in the government-subsidized sector and industry, exempt low-income groups from paying income taxes, and take decisive steps to improve the financial and economic position of enterprises. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 21)

PRESIDENT HOPES TO RESETTLE CHORNOBYL-HIT AREAS — During his visit to southern Belarus, Lukashenka announced that he wants to set up a resettlement area in radiation-contaminated areas and that he will give automatic Belarusian citizenship "within one week" to anyone from a Commonwealth of Independent States country who settles there, dpa reported on 26 April. In other comments, Lukashenka noted that he keeps the distribution of the $150 million annual fund for victims of Chornobyl under his personal control, ITAR-TASS reported. He further said that Minsk stands ready to offer its experience and expertise to

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any place that might suffer a nuclear accident in the future. (RFE/RL Newsline, April 27)

BELARUSIAN CROPS HIT BY FROST — Belarus's Agricultural Ministry has announced that severe frosts in early May destroyed crops over an area of some 200,000 hectares. The most affected regions include Minsk Oblast (78,000 hectares) and Grodno Oblast (63,000 hectares), according to Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service. The authorities have decided to repeat sowing by 15 May. Specialists think, however, that the optimal time for sowing in Belarus has already passed. Meanwhile, Premier Uladzimir Yarmoshyn told the legislature on 11 May that Belarus's "main short-term objective" in agriculture is to end the country's dependence on grain imports, adding that the government expects to harvest 5.7 million tons of grain this year. Last year, Belarus harvested less than 4 million tons, falling well short of its target of 6 million tons. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 12)

LUKASHENKA BLAMES MOSCOW FOR ERECTING TRADE BARRIERS — Lukashenka also accused Russia of failing to meet its obligations under the union treaty by maintaining high prices for energy and imposing trade barriers. "If you do not accept our goods, there will be no political or economic union," Reuters quoted him as saying. "If Russia wants the union, it must resolve the issue of promoting our goods on Russian markets." Lukashenka noted that Russia has not cut prices for its oil, gas, and electricity exports so that they are the same as internal Russian prices. He said such a situation makes Belarusian goods noncompetitive on the Russian market. And he added that Russia has also violated its customs union with Belarus by introducing double taxation on Belarusian exports and erecting new customs posts. "If the situation does not change, we will have to resort to similar measures. That would re-establish the border," he warned. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 19)

BELARUS-RUSSIA LEGISLATURE ENDORSES UNION BUDGET — The Belarus-Russia Union Parliamentary Assembly on 18 May adopted in the first reading the union budget for 2000. The budget amounts to 2.23 billion Russian rubles ($80 million). Russia is to contribute 65 percent and Belarus 35 percent. The money is to be used to finance 30 joint programs. In another resolution adopted the same day, the assembly blasted the U.S. Congress for its 3 May resolution on Belarus. The assembly said the resolution "intentionally and blatantly distorts the state of affairs in Belarus, extremely incorrectly interprets relations between Belarus and Russia as well as the progress of Belarusian-Russian integration processes within the framework of the Belarusian-Russian Union." (RFE/RL Newsline, May 19)

RUSSIA SAYS CUSTOMS POSTS ON BELARUSIAN BORDER 'TEMPORARY.' — Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov said in Minsk on 23 May that the customs posts that were recenlty established on the Russian-Belarusian border are temporary and are intended "to stabilize" customs control, Belarusian Television reported. "These are purely technical elements of a temporary character," the station quoted him as saying. Belarusian Prime Minister Uladzimir Yarmoshyn said the decision to put up the Russian customs posts was prompted by "dishonest foreign trade activities" between the two countries, adding that customs control will be abolished as soon as those "activities" are eliminated. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 24)

RUSSIA'S CENTRAL BANK TO LEND BELARUS $200 MILLION? — Russia's *Vedomosti* reported on 23 May that the Russian Central Bank has agreed to lend Belarus $200 million to support the Belarusian ruble. The loan is reportedly a step toward Russian-Belarusian monetary unification, which is to be finalized in 2005. According to "Vedomosti," in order to receive the money, the Belarusian National Bank does not have to agree that the Russian Central Bank will be the only money-issuing institution in the Russia-Belarus Union. Belarus recently agreed that the Russian ruble will be the union's common currency. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 24)

BELARUS PLANS TO HAVE SINGLE RUBLE EXCHANGE RATE THIS FALL — National Bank Deputy Chairman Mikalay Luzhin has said Belarus will achieve a single ruble exchange rate by the end of September, Belarusian Television reported on 25 May. "[The single rate] is required by economic interests in general, it is required by integration processes with Russia and, of course, it is also named as a condition in negotiations with international financial organizations," Luzhin noted. Currently the bank's exchange rate is 550 rubles to $1, while the street rate stands at 970 rubles. Belarusian exporters are obliged to sell 30 percent of their hard currency revenues to the central bank at its official exchange rate. Luzhin denied reports in some Russian media that Russia's Central Bank has agreed to lend $200 million to Belarus to stabilize its currency (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 24 May 2000). (RFE/RL Newsline, May 26)

BELARUS, UKRAINE CRITICIZE RUSSIA OVER FREE TRADE ACCORD — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his Ukrainian counterpart, Leonid Kuchma, met in Brest on 27 May and agreed to sign accords on mutual debts and border issues, Belapan and Interfax reported. No details of the accords have been made known. Kuchma said after the meeting that Russia pursues its own political interests in the CIS while failing to promote genuine economic integration. "All the CIS countries have ratified the free trade accord, only Russia is undecided. What customs union can we speak of?" Belarusian Television quoted Kuchma as saying. "This is the main problem, a stumbling block.... He [Kuchma] is right," Lukashenka responded. (RFE/RL Newsline, May 29)

GOVERNMENT TO SUPPORT BELARUSIANS LIVING BELOW POVERTY LINE —The government has resolved to provide financial support to those citizens who live below the poverty line, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 7 June. According to official data, some 47 percent of Belarusians fall into that category, which the government defines as being equal to half of the subsistence minimum. Belarus's subsistence minimum--the value of goods and services necessary for the existence of a family of four per head per month--is now $25. The government's resolution obliges the Ministry of Social Assistance to subsidize those Belarusians with the lowest incomes in order to bring their earnings up to the level of $12.5. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 8)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SAYS NO MORE MONEY TO AGRICULTURAL SECTOR — Alyaksandr Lukashenka, meeting with government officials on 13 June, discussed the situation in the agricultural sector, Belarusian Television reported. "I want to give advance notice to oblast executive committee chairmen: today you are forbidden to wail, groan, and weep," Lukashenka commented, "Remember--you have come here not to obtain money.... All the money you asked for was given to you. What is more, we have squeezed out the industrial sector to the extent that they, poor wretches, can barely stand on their feet. Therefore, no more subsidies to the agricultural sector," he said. (RFE/RL Newsline, June 14)

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Independent Media

MAKING WAVES

Broadcasting from the safe-haven of a more democratic Lithuania, Radio Baltic Waves, a small station broadcasting independent news from Vilnius across the border to Belarus, has had a much easier time of it than its counterparts in Belarus who are generally not tolerated. The five privately owned and operated FM radio outlets in Belarus face having their licenses revoked or having the plug pulled on their programming for any aired criticism of the government or the president. At the same time, state-run radio stations offer virtually no information about the activities of the Belarusian opposition, unless that information shows the opposition in a negative light. But it has been against much protest from Belarusian authorities that RBW has offered four and a half hours of news per day to its listeners across the border.

From Vilnius, RBW reaches Minsk, most of western Belarus, and regions up to 300 kilometers away, including Russia's Kaliningrad region. Though it has been broadcasting for nearly five months now, a lack of funding, low support from Lithuanian journalists, pressure from Lukashenko, and the hesitancy of Lithuanian officials to rock the boat with their highly militarized neighbor have the station walking on thin ice. Still, so far grants from the United States and Western Europe, coupled with encouragement from the European Union to nurture a free press, have kept the small station going. Since the tumult surrounding the creation of Radio Baltic Waves, the atmosphere has changed. Following EU accession talks in December, Lithuania has been attempting to bring its policy toward Belarus in line with that of the EU, which has strongly condemned Belarus's poor human rights record, and in particular, Lukashenko's controversial 1996 referendum. Semyon Sharetski, chairman of the disbanded Belarusian parliament, is an ardent supporter of the station who says that Belarusians can hear uncensored news only from foreign radio stations, and the birth of one more radio station in Vilnius is very welcome. (Transitions Online, May 22)

NGO NOTES 'DISASTROUS' SITUATION OF BELARUSIAN-LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The Belarusian School Association has sent a letter to Education Minister Vasil Strazhau deploring the situation of Belarusian-language education, Belapan reported on 27 June. The association argues that the "disastrously low" percentage of schoolchildren in Belarusian-language classes is attributable to the lack of Belarusian-language colleges and universities where they could continue their education in Belarusian. He also pointed to "the open hostility of officials at different levels toward the Belarusian language." The association says it can cite many examples where Belarusian-language schools have been ordered to offer instruction only in Russian. The organization proposes that the government establish a Belarusian National University and open Belarusian-language groups at other institutions of higher education. A 1990 law obliged the government to "Belarusianize" public life in the country by 2000, but President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has ignored that bill and strengthened the Russification of Belarus. (RFE-RL Newsline, June 29)

BELARUSIAN JOURNALISTS DEMAND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) held a demonstration in Minsk on 26 June in defense of the independent press in Belarus, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The demonstrators held placards that read "No to the police state," "Do not write, do not criticize, do not speak--and you will not be sentenced," "Equal economic conditions for state and independent media." BAJ Chairwoman Zhana Litvina told RFE/RL that the association is demanding "equal economic conditions for the operation of the independent press. We protest the refusal to supply information [by government officials to non-state media]." Meanwhile, a correspondent for the Slovak newspaper *Sme* who took part in the demonstration to show solidarity with the Belarusian journalists noted that the "authorities deceive the Belarusian people. It is very hard for me personally to obtain information from the authorities in this country." (RFE-RL Newsline, June 27)

MEDIA WATCH

Democratic Path for Belarus (*The Wall Street Journal - European edition*, "Belarus Can Return to the Democratic Path," May 5, 2000)

Marc Thiessen and Ian Brzezinski, who authored this article, serve on the majority staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. They visited Minsk recently and crafted the following story:

"Arriving in Minsk is like stepping back in time into the old USSR. Statues of Lenin and KGB founder Feliks Dzerzhinsky still stand proudly in the squares of the capital; people wait in long lines outside state stores for bread, shoes and whatever items may be available that day; and troops stand on every street corner, menacing to passersby. Unlike Russia, Belarus has not even bothered to change the name of its security apparatus from 'KGB.' Belarus, as one diplomat here put it, is 'a Soviet theme park.' "

The authors find the "brutality of President Lukashenko's regime is very real." Over the past year, former Interior Minister Yury Zakharenko, opposition leader Victor Gonchar and a business colleague, Anatoly Krasovsky, vanished. Numerous opposition figures have been jailed, harassed, and tried, including Social Democratic Party head Nikolai Statkevich and former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir.

"Belarus is fast becoming the Cuba of Europe — a sore spot of tyranny in a region of emerging and maturing democracies. As is the case in Cuba, all power in Belarus is concentrated in the hands of a megalomaniacal leader, prone to multi-hour speeches and irrational outbursts. As in Cuba, the state controls the right to work, education and health care. Mr. Lukashenko has decreed himself the power to confiscate property at his whim. "

But there is one important difference, the authors note. "Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus enjoyed four brief years of democracy. And in those four years, a civil society took root that is refusing to die quietly. Independent newspapers struggle to publish, despite harassment, intimidation, arbitrary fines and arrests. The leadership of the parliament dismissed by the president refuses to concede legitimacy to his sham regime, and scores of non-governmental organizations fight for space in society."

Despite government's threats, tens of thousands show up for regular anti regime rallies. "What this all demonstrates," say the authors, "is that the fight for democracy here is eminently winnable. The Belarus opposition is organized and has made great strides in putting aside differences to present a united front. Their agenda is a free, independent, Western-oriented Belarus, that will take its place alongside its neighbors in Central Europe and the Baltic States as a member of the European democratic community. Mr. Lukashenko's agenda, by contrast, points to the East."

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According to the authors, Putin's election to the Russian presidency has dashed Lukashenka Kremlin dreams and "presents an opportunity for the West to salvage Belorussian independence and democracy. So far, however, . . . Western capitals--including Washington--have ignored Belarus' backslide into tyranny." In view of the authors, this is a grave error. "Allowing Moscow to reabsorb an independent democratic state that emerged from the Soviet collapse will only whet Moscow's appetite to further restore Soviet borders, setting a destabilizing precedent for other new democracies in the region such as Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Indulging Russian hegemony in Belarus also undermines Russian democracy. A more immediate threat is that Belarus will become a proxy for Russia's dealings with rogue states such as Iraq and Iran, doing business on Moscow's behalf while giving the Kremlin plausible deniability. Indeed, this is already happening."

What can the West do? Here is the authors' advise: "Help Lukashenko's opponents break the government's information blockade through support for independent newspapers and increased radio broadcasting. Provide direct support for the opposition, in the same way financial, intelligence and diplomatic support was offered to Poland's Solidarity movement. The West should deny recognition and legitimacy to the agreements Belarus signs and ratifies — including the Union treaty with Russia."

"Finally, the Western allies must make Russian respect for an independent Belarus a condition of Western engagement. Russia's new sophisticated and assertive president will seek to exploit the damage Mr. Lukashenko has done to Belarus's sovereignty. If that impulse is not checked, and if Belarus is allowed to slip further into Russia's embrace, the West is destined to find itself with a totalitarian Russian satellite state on the border of NATO."

Belarus Dissidents (*Rocky Mountain News*, "Dissidents fight to end Belarussian tyranny," May 21, 2000)

The article is about two Belarusian dissidents, Pavel Zhuk and Zmitser Bandarenka, visiting the U.S., who tell of horrors in their country under the dictatorship of President Lukashenko. Despite the dangers of publicly opposing the president, the article says, Bandarenka, Zhuk and other brave Belarussian dissidents continue to organize protest marches that have attracted up to 40,000 people to which Lukashenko has responded with massive police crackdowns, detaining and beating marchers and rounding up reporters.

U.S. and European pressure has helped mitigate some of the oppression, according to the article, but Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch continue to report systematic human rights violations. And, "while opposition polls suggest Lukashenko is only supported by 38 percent of the electorate, there is little hope of Belarus having free and fair elections as long as he is in power." "An admirer of Hitler and Stalin, Lukashenko has turned his Kansas-sized nation into a police state and destroyed its economy with Soviet-style central planning. Obsessed by 'hostile forces' at home and 'enemies abroad' — NATO, the United States, the European Union — Lukashenko uses his KGB to censor the media, keep a lid on trade unions, break up opposition demonstrations and hound opponents into jail or exile. Sometimes his critics simply 'disappear.' "

EU Delegation Critical of Lukashenka (*The New York Times*, "Belarus Chief Is Rebuked by Delegation From Europe," June 22, 2000)

The article reports that a delegation from the European Parliament severely criticized President Lukashenka's assault on his political opponents and threatened to withhold a team of observers for parliamentary elections to be held in the fall. According to the article, the opposition is trying to oust Lukashenka from office by forcing him to submit to a fair election. Mikhail Chigir, Lukashenka's prime minister who quit over the 1996 dissolution of Parliament, said that he intended to run for Parliament this fall and for president next spring if Lukashenko would allow genuine elections.

"The rebuke from the visiting Europeans . . . comes as both the United States and Russian leaders are stepping up their pressure on Mr. Lukashenko," says the article. "In Washington, the House of Representatives last month passed a nonbinding resolution condemning human rights violations and the suppression of democracy in Belarus. A number of members of Congress are urging Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright to meet with Belarusian opposition leaders at a conference on democracy in Poland next week. In Moscow, three prominent political figures, including former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and the Yabloko Party's leader, Grigory Yavlinsky, signed an appeal to Mr. Lukashenko this week to liberalize the election process by allowing opposition access to state-controlled news media and to election oversight. So far Mr. Lukashenko has refused both."

The article reports that Lukashenko flew to Moscow to meet President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. In the Russian capital, according to the article, "the Belarussian leader indulged in his favorite sport of baiting NATO and the West, which he said feared a 'strong competitor' on the territory of the former Soviet Union. For that reason, he said, 'Belarus will do all it can to speed up integration with Russia rather than slow down.' 'Belarus,' he said, 'will not turn away from our Russia . . .' "

Russian Leaders for Free Elections in Belarus (*The New York Times*, "Russians Push for Free Elections in Belarus," June 28, 2000)

According to the article, Russian parliamentary leaders said on June 27 that they are appealing to "Belarus's autocratic president to allow the country's opposition parties to take part in all aspects of elections this fall." "We are convinced that the legislation for elections to the Belarussian Parliament must meet international standards, and the vote should be democratic and fair," the appeal says.

The final draft of the appeal, the article says, was coordinated with but not openly endorsed by the Kremlin, will carry the signatures of Yevgeny Primakov, head of the Fatherland-All Russia Party; Boris Gryzlov, leader of the Unity Party, which is most closely aligned with President Vladimir V. Putin; and the leaders of the Yabloko and Union of Right Forces parties.

Belarusian opposition leaders, according to the article, visited Moscow last week to seek assistance from liberal party leaders to put pressure on Mr. Lukashenka. In Minsk, Yury Khadyka (Khodyko), deputy chairman of the opposition Popular Front, told reporters that it makes sense to take part in elections that really give the right to choose. But based on Mr. Lukashenka's statements so far, he said, the opposition fears that he is planning to hold a farce, not legitimate elections.

Lukashenka was in Moscow June 27 and met with Mr. Putin but they made no public comments about the elections in Belarus.

Monument to Karpenka (*The New York Times*, 'Sculpting a Monument to a Vanished Democracy' June 29, 2000)

This article tells a story about Henadz Karpenka (Gennadi Karpenko), a prominent Belarusian opposition politician, who last year died under suspicious circumstances. Miensk sculptor Ivan Y. Misko is working on a bust of his friend Karpenka. The monument is almost ready for unveiling at Mr. Karpenko's tomb, a ceremony that when it takes place "will be a significant political act in this authoritarian state."

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According to the article, Mr. Karpenka, a physicist and politician, was, until his death on April 6, 1999, one of the most dangerous men in Belarus as the leader of the opposition forces seeking to oust President Lukashenka."Mr. Karpenko, a deputy speaker of the Parliament disbanded by Mr.Lukashenko in 1996, died abruptly at age 49 of what the medical authorities here said was a brain hemorrhage. Though there is no proof of foul play, the circumstances surrounding Mr. Karpenko's final hours — he received no serious medical attention for 24 hours after he collapsed and entered a state medical center — have caused his family to doubt that he died of natural causes."

"From the very beginning I suspected that he was murdered somehow," said his wife, Lyudmila. "And when other opposition leaders started disappearing months later, it confirmed my suspicions." "I am afraid for my children," Mrs. Karpenko said. "They don't have a future in this country. We are going to open the monument to Gennadi, and then we are going to leave the country. It is just too hard to live here."

In a gesture of respect for Mr. Karpenka's advocacy of democracy, the American ambassador, Daniel V. Speckhard, made a private visit to the grave site last year accompanied by Mrs. Karpenka.

The unveiling of the Karpenka memorial, the article says, is scheduled for sometime after the Congress of Democratic Forces, a grouping of opposition parties, convenes on July 2 here in the capital. "Unless Mr. Lukashenko bans it, the congress aims to unite all opposition parties in a new challenge to the president. The congress, its organizers say, will demand fair elections this fall for a new Parliament and next year for a new president."

The article continues: "For that reason, Mr. Karpenka death was deeply disturbing to many here, and in the months that followed, Belarussians were all the more stunned by the assault on most of the remaining opposition leaders. In the last year, the political landscape has been wiped clean, says Irina Khalip, an independent journalist who has been arrested and harassed for her coverage of corruption and political abuse under Mr.Lukashenko."

"All political leaders who might have laid claim to the presidency have either died under suspicious circumstances, like Karpenko, or they have fled in fear of their lives or disappeared," she said. "The remaining ones have been convicted of political crimes with conditions that they cannot participate in the elections, and so today there is almost no opposition figure who could run against Lukashenko."

LETTERS

Clarification to An Interview Statement in BELARUSIAN REVIEW

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the dedication with which you disseminate information about our country amongst your English speaking readership. I was pleased to see the interview I gave Prof. David Marples published in the spring issue of *Belarusian Review*. I noticed with regret however that because of my imperfect knowledge of English a few, somewhat ambiguous formulations of very essential items have slipped into the interview.

Specifically, I would like to clarify the comment with reference to the knowledge that "ordinary Belarusians" have about BNR in the following way: "Unfortunately, (due to communist indoctrination and Lukashenka's anti-Belarusian propaganda) many people simply do not realize the significance of BNR."

I would be very thankful if you could publish this clarification, since to me, loyalty to the ideals of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) and the activity of the BNR Rada are essential for the preservation and continuity of our independence. I consider that all independence-related endeavors in Belarus must take this requirement into account. In 1997, I was one of the initiators of a symbolic BNR citizenship. And as a deputy editor of the review "Spadčyna", I have done all I could to overcome the above mentioned lack of public awareness through educational publications. No polemics nor any tactical moves of political campaigns in contemporary Belarus will undermine the significance of BNR ideals or the role of the BNR Rada.

Vincuk Viačorka
Miensk, Belarus

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